

# Kantian Aesthetics

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## Sublimity and Esteem<sup>1</sup>

In Murray, B. (2015). [\*The Possibility of Culture: Pleasure and Moral Development in Kant's Aesthetics\*](#). John Wiley & Sons.

### Not to disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being

Just as Kant's development of his account of the pleasure of beauty is intertwined with his broader ethical priorities, so, too is his account of the pleasure of sublimity. And just as Kant holds that beauty's connection with our emotional life, and specifically with the emotion of love, makes its pursuit conducive to our moral development by helping us to

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<sup>1</sup> Citations of Kant's texts indicate an abbreviated title, along with the volume and page number of the Academy edition of Kant's writings (*Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, Akademie Ausgabe [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–]). Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992-) (Ca).

Anthropology: (1798) Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

CJ: (1790) *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Concept of Race: (1785) Determination of the Concept of a Human Race, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

CPR: (1781) Critique of Judgment Critique of Pure Reason

CPrR: (1788) Critique of Practical Reason, Ca Practical Philosophy

Enlightenment: (1784) An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?, Ca Practical Philosophy

Ethics: Lectures on Ethics

FI: Unpublished Introduction to the Critique of Judgment, Ca Critique of the Power of Judgment

Groundwork: (1785) Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Ca Practical Philosophy

Idea: (1784) Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

Lectures on Anthropology: Lectures on Anthropology

Magnitudes: (1763) Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy, Ca Theoretical philosophy

Maladies: (1764) Essay on the Maladies of the Head, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

Metaphysics: Lectures on Metaphysics

Morals: (1797) The Metaphysics of Morals, Ca Practical Philosophy

Observations: (1764) Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

Peace: (1795) Toward Perpetual Peace, Ca Practical Philosophy

Pedagogy: (1803) Lectures on Pedagogy, Ca Anthropology, History, and Education

Reflections: Reflections

Religion: (1793) Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, Ca Religion and Rational Philosophy

Theory: (1793) On the Common Saying: That May be True in Theory, But it is of No Use in Practice, Ca Practical Philosophy

distance ourselves from our inclinations, so, too, does he hold that sublimity's connection with our emotional life makes it conducive to this end. The difference, on Kant's account, is that, instead of being connected with love, sublimity is connected with respect or esteem. Thus, in the passage from Section 29 of the third *Critique* which we have already partially considered, Kant claims not only that the pleasure of beauty "prepares us to love something, even nature, apart from any interest," but also that the pleasure of sublimity prepares us "to esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest."<sup>2</sup> A first question, then, is why developing our capacity for esteem might serve our moral development. A second question is whether we have good reason to accept Kant's view that the experience of sublimity is, in fact, closely connected with esteem.

It is possible, in the first place, to distinguish three different roles that Kant takes feelings of respect and esteem to be capable of playing in moral life. The first emerges most clearly in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. We considered, in Chapter 2, Kant's distinction between practical and pathological versions of the feeling of love. The same distinction will apply to the feeling of respect. In the second *Critique's* account of moral motivation, Kant has practical respect, specifically, in mind.<sup>3</sup> As human animals, he claims, we can "never be altogether free from desires and inclinations which, because

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<sup>2</sup> CJ 5:267.

<sup>3</sup> Kant emphasizes that practical respect is "produced solely by reason" (CPrR 5:76). The present interpretation is, broadly speaking, compatible with Henry Allison's, which emphasizes the role of the nonfeeling component of respect in the motivation of actions carried out from duty. What matters most when it comes to such motivation, Allison claims, is the recognition of the law's "supremely authoritative character, which is to be taken to mean that it provides a reason for action that outweighs or overrides all other reasons, particularly those stemming from one's desires" (*Kant's Theory of Freedom* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 123). For a general overview of these issues, see Iain Morriison, *Kant and the Role of Pleasure in Moral Action* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008).

they rest on physical causes, do not of themselves accord with the moral law.”<sup>4</sup>

Overcoming these desires and inclinations inevitably involves “inner necessitation to what one does not altogether like to do,” and one way to bring this about is through feeling practical respect for the moral law itself.<sup>5</sup> In complying with the moral law out of respect, we can expect to feel an accompanying feeling of “dread,” even if, at the same time, we hold the law in high esteem.<sup>6</sup>

The second role that Kant takes a feeling of respect to be capable of playing in moral life emerges in the *Observations*. Here, Kant conceives respect to be a pathological rather than practical feeling. Specifically, he takes it to be a feeling of the dignity of human nature. Such a feeling, he claims, “lives in every human breast.”<sup>7</sup> Like pathological love, Kant takes pathological respect to help us to resist our personal inclinations and to act with greater impartiality. In love, we are able to resist our inclinations because we feel affectionately towards others and wish to see them benefit. In respect, we are able to resist our inclinations because we have the feeling that they possess dignity and do not want them to end up in situations that compromise this dignity.

The first two roles that feelings of respect can play in moral life are, ultimately, less directly relevant to Kant’s account of the pleasure of sublimity than the third. In this role, a feeling of respect or esteem is directed towards certain aspects of *oneself* – which makes it a feeling of self-respect or self-esteem (*Selbstschätzung*).<sup>8</sup> To better understand this notion of self-esteem, it will help to attend to the section of the

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<sup>4</sup> CPrR 5:84.

<sup>5</sup> CPrR 5:83-5:84.

<sup>6</sup> CPrR 5:84.

<sup>7</sup> *Observations* 2:217.

<sup>8</sup> *Morals* 6:399.

*Metaphysics of Morals* entitled “On Servility.” There, Kant begins by considering the value of personhood: a person, he claims, is “not to be valued merely as a means to the ends of others or even to his own ends, but as an end in itself,” which is to say that a person “possesses a *dignity* (an absolute inner worth) by which he exacts *respect* for himself from all other rational beings in the world.”<sup>9</sup> Beyond being entitled to respect from other rational beings, Kant claims, persons are to value and respect *themselves* insofar as they are persons. When someone recognizes his rational nature, Kant claims, “there comes *exaltation* of the highest self-esteem, the feeling of his inner worth (*valor*), in terms of which he is above any price (*pretium*) and possesses an inalienable dignity (*dignitas interna*), which instills in him respect for himself (*reverentia*).”<sup>10</sup> Kant’s underlying thought is that, to the extent that we are capable of feeling such self-esteem as rational beings, we will be better able to resist our inclinations. Specifically, “worldly” concerns, including the concern to satisfy our inclinations, will come to seem relatively trivial to us when we consider them alongside our rational natures.<sup>11</sup>

In claiming that our personhood, and resulting dignity, derive from the rational aspects of ourselves, Kant also specifies that these do not derive from our sensible natures, or from aspects of ourselves that are connected with our status as human animals. In fact, Kant claims that it is appropriate to value ourselves by a low standard when we are thinking of ourselves as such animals:

Humanity in his person is the object of the respect which he can demand from every other human being, but which he must also not forfeit. Hence he can and

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<sup>9</sup> *Morals* 6:435. Cf. *Groundwork* 4:428; *Groundwork* 4:438.

<sup>10</sup> *Morals* 6:435-7.

<sup>11</sup> *CJ* 5:261-2.

should value himself by a low as well as by a high standard, depending on whether he views himself as a sensible being (in terms of his animal nature) or as an intelligible being (in terms of his moral predisposition). Since he must regard himself not only as a person generally but also as a *human being*, that is, as a person who has duties his own reason lays upon him, his insignificance as a *human animal* may not infringe upon his consciousness of his dignity as a *rational human being*, and he should not disavow the moral self-esteem of such a being....<sup>12</sup>

In Kant's view, then, our self-esteem should be divided. On the one hand, we should have a high moral self-esteem – that is, a high-self esteem insofar as we consider ourselves as rational beings capable of acting on moral principles. On the other hand, we should have a low self-esteem insofar as we are human animals.

As mentioned earlier, Kant's tendency to disparage the "animal" aspects of human beings is controversial. In light of this fact, the best way to proceed in reconstructing Kant's account of sublimity will be to avoid taking on unneeded presuppositions about the distinction between animality and rationality. In fact, many of these presuppositions are not central to a Kantian framework for understanding the experience of sublimity. What is central, however, is his claim that in its structure, our motivation is divided. On the one hand, we have inclinations that lead us to act in ways that often leave out the needs of others. On the other hand, we have the capacity to reflect on ourselves and on our inclinations in order ultimately to resist them, and we may, moreover, feel esteem towards this reflective aspect of ourselves.

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<sup>12</sup> *Morals*: 6:435.

Before turning to Kant's account of sublimity itself, it is worth noting one further area of potential controversy that surrounds it. Kant seeks at times to incorporate controversial elements of his transcendental idealism into his account of what it means for us to have rational natures, and this feeds directly into his account of sublimity. For instance, sometimes he talks as if recognizing our true natures as rational human beings involves becoming aware of "supersensible" aspects of ourselves, which Kant takes to be aspects of ourselves that are not subject to natural laws.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Kant claims that one source of the self-esteem that we discover during certain experiences of sublimity comes from the recognition that we possess "a faculty that is itself supersensible,"<sup>14</sup> and he describes the feeling that we have in an experience of sublimity as making us "alive to the feeling of the supersensible side of our being."<sup>15</sup> Just as there are advantages to reconstructing Kant's account of sublimity in a way that does not invoke the extraneous claim that we are to devalue the animal side of our nature, there are advantages to reconstructing the account in a way that does not invoke extraneous metaphysical claims about the self. This is possible since what is essential to Kant's account does not depend on these metaphysical claims. Of course,

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant takes up the issue of "transcendental" freedom:

It is especially noteworthy that it is this transcendental idea of freedom on which the practical concept of freedom is grounded, and the former constitutes the real moment of the difficulties in the latter, which have long surrounded the question of its possibility. Freedom in the practical sense is the independence of the power of choice from necessitation by impulses of sensibility. For a power of choice is sensible insofar as it is pathologically affected (through moving-causes of sensibility); it is called an animal power of choice (*arbitrium brutum*) if it can be pathologically necessitated. The human power of choice is indeed an *arbitrium sensitivum* [sensible power of choice], yet not *brutum* but *liberum*, because sensibility does not render its action necessary, but in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses. (A533/B561-A534/B562)

For more on Kant's notion of transcendental freedom see, for example, Karl Ameriks, "Kant's Deduction of Freedom and Morality," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, 1 (2008), 53-79, and Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom*.

<sup>14</sup> CJ 5:254; Cf. CJ 5:255.

<sup>15</sup> CJ 5:257-8.

even if reconstructing Kant's account of sublimity without them yields a view that is less controversial than it might otherwise be, this does not mean that the account succeeds in the end. Indeed, we will see that what is most controversial about it goes deeper than this.

## **A might of the mind**

Kant holds that, whereas an object that we find beautiful seems to us to convey “a finality in its form making the object appear, as it were, pre-adapted to our power of judgement, so that it thus forms of itself an object of our delight,” an object that we find sublime seems instead to convey a “contra-finality” in its form. The latter sort of object appears, Kant suggests, to “contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account.”<sup>16</sup>

Although this notion of contra-finality is central to Kant's account of sublimity, invoking it alone does not fully explain why the state is pleasurable. The next aspect of Kant's account is that our experience of contra-finality prompts us to recognize an aspect of ourselves that somehow exceeds in stature the experienced hindrance. As Kant puts it, what we call sublime “in external nature, or even internal nature (e.g. certain affects) is only represented as a might of the mind enabling it to overcome this or that hindrance of sensibility.”<sup>17</sup> This part of ourselves is precisely our rational nature – it is the aspect of ourselves that is capable of the kind of self-reflection needed to act on principles and to

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<sup>16</sup> CJ 5:245.

<sup>17</sup> CJ 5:277.

oppose inclinations.

Why, though, should experiencing contra-finality prompt us to recognize our rational natures? In order to answer this question, we must note, first of all, that it is an enduring theme in Kant's thought that there is insight to be gained from experiences in which we feel humbled or humiliated by mighty forces. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for instance, Kant considers the experience of being humiliated by the moral law as exemplified in a "humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself."<sup>18</sup> Before a person like this, Kant claims, "my spirit bows."<sup>19</sup> Observing such a person challenges our self-conceit and helps us to recognize the aspects of ourselves that ground our own dignity. These, specifically, are those aspects of ourselves that are connected with our capacity for moral action.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Kant holds that we can experience humiliation upon being reminded of the moral law, he also holds that we can experience this feeling when we experience contra-finality as we engage with various phenomena. The pleasure that we feel in an experience of sublimity accompanies our feeling of heightened self-esteem, which arises as we recognize the strength that inheres in our rational nature. Thus, Kant's account entails that we actually take pleasure in an aspect of *ourselves* while we are experiencing sublimity. This is why Kant describes sublimity as characterized by a "subreption," or a "substitution of a respect for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self."<sup>21</sup> If the pleasure of sublimity really does involve such a

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<sup>18</sup> CPrR 5:76-77.

<sup>19</sup> CPrR 5:77.

<sup>20</sup> Kant returns to this theme in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he describes moral humility as consisting in "[t]he consciousness and feeling of the insignificance of one's moral worth *in comparison with the law*." He contrasts moral humility with moral arrogance, which he describes as "a conviction of the greatness of one's moral worth, but only from failure to compare it with the law" (Morals 6:435-7).

<sup>21</sup> CJ 5:257. In fact, Kant's view is that it is only possible to feel respect towards human beings; as he puts it in the second *Critique*, "[r]espect is always directed only to persons, never to things" (CPrR 5:76). Robert Clewis



subreption, then it will be correct to say, as Kant does, that sublimity “does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, insofar as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us).”<sup>22</sup>

Kant, himself, poses a question that his account of sublimity naturally raises, namely the question of how something that is “apprehended as inherently contra-final” can at the same time be “noted with an expression of approval.”<sup>23</sup> Kant’s answer, we are seeing, is that it is precisely because there is an initial, displeasurable, experience of contra-finality in an experience of sublimity that a pleasurable experience can ensue. And yet, the experience of sublimity has a mixed character on Kant’s account. This means that Kant is not in a position to describe it as a purely pleasurable experience, as he describes the experience of beauty. Thus, he writes that whereas the pleasure of beauty is one that is “directly attended with a feeling of the furtherance of life,” the pleasure of sublimity is a “negative pleasure.” In the case of sublimity, there is an initial “check to the vital forces,” and “the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also

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suggests that subreption is not essential to experiences of sublimity, by which he means that subjects can come consciously to recognize that the source of the pleasure that is being attributed to the object does not lie in the object itself, but within their own mind (*The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 61). It is an interesting question just which aspects of this recognition may occur consciously, and which may occur unconsciously, on Kant’s view. There is certainly at least some plausibility to Clewis’ model, which appears to incorporate unconscious processes which may become conscious.

<sup>22</sup> CJ 5:264. Kant’s account of sublimity is grounded in the idea that the pleasurable aspect of the experience derives from our becoming aware of an aspect of ourselves that we experience to manifest “superiority” over sensible hindrances. But, Kant holds, it is important to distinguish between a person’s “feeling for his sublime vocation, that is, his *elation of spirit (elatio animi)* or esteem for himself,” on the one hand, and a person’s “*self-conceit (arrogantia)*, which is the “very opposite of true *humility (humilitas moralis)*” (Morals 6:437). On Kant’s view, self-esteem is a precondition for being a moral agent in the first place. That is, according to Kant, there are certain moral endowments “such that anyone lacking them could have no duty to acquire them,” and these include “*moral feeling, conscience, love of one’s neighbour, and respect for oneself (self-esteem)*” (Morals 6:399). There is no obligation to have these moral endowments, Kant writes, precisely because they “lie at the basis of morality, as *subjective* conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty, not as objective conditions of morality” (Morals 6:399). Not only does self-conceit fail to occupy such a place at the foundation of morality, on Kant’s view, but it also constitutes a hindrance to moral development.

<sup>23</sup> CJ 5:245.

alternately repelled thereby,” making the pleasure of sublimity “not sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination.”<sup>24</sup>

Kant divides experiences of sublimity into those of “external nature,” and those of “internal nature.” Experiences of sublimity belonging to the category of external nature include those of mathematical and dynamical sublimity. In the case of mathematical sublimity, to begin with, the experienced contra-finality results from the representation of a vast magnitude. Roughly speaking, in representing such a magnitude, we feel that, try as we might, we will never be able fully to perceive it. The magnitude seems to us to be too vast for our perceptual capacities as human beings. As Kant puts it, “[i]n the immeasurableness of nature and the inadequacy of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we [find] our own limitation.”<sup>25</sup>

Kant’s explanation of the experience of mathematical sublimity depends partly on his claim that we must engage in a process of synthesis in order to form representations of entities whose parts we cannot experience all at once. The synthetic process that Kant describes here will be different from the process that he describes in the first *Critique’s* first edition transcendental deduction, which we considered briefly in Chapter 3. The primary difference is that, whereas Kant earlier invoked the process of synthesis in order to explain how it is possible for us to represent objectivity, as such – that is, how it is possible for a stream of purely subjective representations that are not initially united in the representation of an object to gain such unity – he is now invoking a version of this

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<sup>24</sup> CJ 5:244-5.

<sup>25</sup> CJ 5:261.

process in order to explain how we might represent what we experience as parts of objects as belonging to larger objects. Thus, the units that we apprehend are now taken already to be imbued with objectivity in the relevant sense.

The relevant synthetic process is one that involves acts of “apprehension” and “comprehension.” In order for us to represent a large object, such as an Egyptian pyramid, Kant claims, we must carry out a process involving both kinds of act. The initially apprehended parts will be tiers of stones. But in order for us to get a sense of the magnitude of the pyramid as a whole, we must carry out acts of comprehension in which, as it were, we hold together in our minds the various parts that we have apprehended.<sup>26</sup> Kant’s point is that there are limits to our capacities for apprehension and comprehension, and our efforts to represent large magnitudes bring these limits to light. When it comes to apprehension, it is obvious that we face limits resulting from the nature of our perceptual systems. We are, for example, unable to see all of a large pyramid at once. When it comes to comprehension, Kant takes our limits, broadly speaking, to have to do with our memories. As he puts it, “if the apprehension has reached a point beyond which the representations of sensuous intuition in the case of the parts first apprehended begin to disappear from the imagination as this advances to the apprehension of yet others, as much, then is lost at one end as is gained at the other, and for comprehension we get a maximum which the imagination cannot exceed.” In the case of the pyramid, specifically, we need time to apprehend it stone by stone, but, Kant claims, “in this interval the first tiers always in part disappear before the imagination has taken in the last, and so the comprehension is never complete.” Generally speaking, Kant holds, there is a “maximum which the imagination cannot

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<sup>26</sup> CJ 5:252.

exceed,” or in other words, there is “an absolute measure beyond which no greater is possible subjectively (i.e. for the judging Subject).”<sup>27</sup>

If engaging with an object such as a pyramid can, at least under certain circumstances, make clear the limitations of our imaginations, then we can expect that engaging with even larger objects will bring the point home more forcefully. Kant seeks to explain this idea by invoking the notion of measurement. If we continue to consider ever-larger magnitudes, Kant claims, we move from magnitudes that we are more capable of grasping to those that seem simply impossible for us to grasp, so that standards of measurement will eventually become meaningless to us. For instance, we can grasp the height of a tree because it is not much greater than the height of a human being; we can grasp the height of a mountain because it is the height of such-and-such many trees; we can grasp the earth’s diameter because it is as long as the height of such-and-such many mountains; and so on. But as we continue this list, it becomes ever more difficult truly to grasp the magnitude of the relevant objects, since “in our onward advance we always arrive at proportionately greater units.”<sup>28</sup> When, finally, we attempt to contemplate the size of the cosmos as a whole, Kant suggests, it will seem to us to be *absolutely great* no matter what vantage point we occupy and no matter what unit of measurement we adopt. Its magnitude will be one that we are simply unable to grasp. We feel as if we are facing the onset of a never-ending process that we are incapable of completing, which involves a “feeling of the effort towards a comprehension that exceeds the faculty of imagination for mentally grasping the progressive apprehension in a whole of intuition.”<sup>29</sup> Our attempts at grasping large magnitudes, then, provoke

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<sup>27</sup> CJ 5:252.

<sup>28</sup> CJ 5:256.

<sup>29</sup> CJ 5:255.

“break downs” of the faculty of imagination. In so doing they reveal our own cognitive inadequacy and humiliate us insofar as we had previously harboured the feeling that the universe is somehow within our grasp.<sup>30</sup>

According to Kant, the element of contra-finality that is part of an experience of mathematical sublimity prompts us to recognize that there is actually a way in which we are capable of conceiving of the relevant synthetic processes of apprehension and comprehension as complete. This is not by employing our perceptual capacities, but by employing our capacity for rationality. Reason, Kant claims, “requires totality, and consequently comprehension in *one* intuition,” and demands that we regard the infinite magnitude “as *completely given*.”<sup>31</sup> Kant’s point is that we are capable of forming the idea of an infinite magnitude in spite of the fact that we have never succeeded in perceiving such a magnitude. Insofar as it enables us to recognize that our rational capacities operate to some extent independently of the sensible world – the world in which vast objects are located – and independently of our sensible inclinations, the experience of mathematical sublimity challenges our self-conceit as sensible beings, and provides an opportunity to feel heightened self-esteem as we recognize the pre-eminence of our rational capacities. This feeling of self-esteem accounts for both the pleasurable aspect of the experience, as well as its capacity to foster our long-term moral development.

In the case of dynamical sublimity, we experience contra-finality as a consequence of representing the phenomenon with which we are engaging as possessing a great deal

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<sup>30</sup> CJ 5:253.

<sup>31</sup> CJ 5:254.

of might. Because it possesses such might, Kant claims, it is “looked upon as an object of fear.”<sup>32</sup> As Kant puts it, “[b]old, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might.” Kant specifies that he is not suggesting that we are actually afraid of such mighty phenomena while we are experiencing them as dynamically sublime. He distinguishes between looking upon an object as fearful, on the one hand, and fearing the object, on the other hand. Experiencing something as fearful without being afraid of it is a matter of “simply *picturing to ourselves* the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognizing that all such resistance would be quite futile.” In fact, Kant claims, it is necessary that we not actually fear the object, because doing so will likely interfere with our having a pleasurable aesthetic experience to begin with. Rather than continuing to contemplate an object of which we are afraid, we are instead inclined to flee; it is impossible, Kant claims, to “delight in terror that is seriously entertained.”<sup>33</sup> Encountering the mighty object humiliates exaggerated beliefs that we might have concerning our own power as embodied beings, forcing upon us “the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature.”<sup>34</sup> But the experience also brings to light the fact that there are aspects of ourselves – again, our rational capacities – which can operate without regard for our physical well-being. In this way, the experience of dynamical sublimity provides us with an opportunity “to regard as small those things of

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<sup>32</sup> CJ 5:261.

<sup>33</sup> CJ 5:261.

<sup>34</sup> CJ 5:261.

which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life),” and to focus instead on “our highest principles.”<sup>35</sup> It is this change of focus, or subreption, that ultimately, Kant suggests, “saves humanity in our own person from humiliation.”<sup>36</sup>

Experiences of sublimity in internal nature, like experiences of sublimity in external nature, arise alongside experiences of contra-finality; Kant claims, as we have seen, that what we call sublime “in external nature, or even internal nature (e.g. certain affects) is only represented as a might of the mind enabling it to overcome this or that hindrance of sensibility.” Experiences of sublimity in internal nature have to do, specifically, with our experience of mental states arising in ourselves or in others.<sup>37</sup> For example, according to Kant, anger and desperation – the latter in the form of “the rage of forlorn hope,” but not mere “faint-hearted despair” – excite “the consciousness of our power of overcoming every resistance.” These states are “affects,” on Kant’s scheme for categorizing mental states, and more specifically, affects “of the strenuous type.”<sup>38</sup> A “strenuous” affect is precisely one that can make us conscious of our capacity to overcome hindrances or resistances. When we experience a strenuous affect such as anger in ourselves, or observe it in someone else, we may form a representation of the overcoming of a hindrance – perhaps, say, an injustice – which, in turn, may lead us to

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<sup>35</sup> CJ 5:261-2.

<sup>36</sup> CJ 5:262.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Crowther – who considers sublimity in internal nature to be a variety of dynamical sublimity – offers an interpretation of the former that is similar in spirit to the present one. He maintains that we may experience sublimity “when some affect arises in circumstances that enable us to become more generally aware of our moral capacity and its possible employments” (*The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 117).

<sup>38</sup> CJ 5:272. In the third *Critique*, Kant distinguishes affects from passions. Affects, he claims, “are related merely to feeling; passions belong to the faculty of desire, and are inclinations that hinder or render impossible all determinability of the power of choice through principles.” Whereas Kant holds that affects may be sublime, he holds that “[u]nder no circumstances” can passions be sublime, for the reason that “while the freedom of the mind is, no doubt, *impeded* in the case of affects, in passion it is abrogated (CJ 5:272n.).

recognize our capacity actually to overcome such a hindrance. The recognition of the fact that we have this capacity will, on Kant's account, go hand in hand with a pleasurable feeling of self-esteem. What Kant calls "languid" affects, by contrast, do not make us conscious of our capacity to overcome hindrances. For instance, when we are experiencing a mere "sympathetic grief that refuses to be consoled," or a grief that has to do with an imaginary misfortune that we have suffered, we are in no way inspired to recognize our power of overcoming hindrances.

Another mental state that Kant takes to be sublime is the feeling of disappointment with humanity. Kant is careful to point out that this feeling is not the same as full-blown misanthropy, which is a feeling of outright enmity towards our fellow human beings. Nor is it the same as "anthrophobia," which is the shunning of others because we imagine that they are against us. Disappointment with humanity is more benign than these other states, and is common in "right-minded" people as they age; it is the result of "long and sad experience," and is rooted in dashed hopes for humanity:

Falsehood, ingratitude, injustice, the puerility of the ends which we ourselves look upon as great and momentous, and to attain which we inflict upon our fellow human beings all imaginable evils – these all so contradict the idea of what people might be if they only would, and are so at variance with our active wish to see them better, that, to avoid hating where we cannot love, it seems but a slight sacrifice to forgo all the joys of fellowship with our kind.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, disappointment with humanity is at bottom a feeling of sadness over the ills that

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<sup>39</sup> CJ 5:276.



human beings inflict on each other. It is connected with sublimity, Kant claims, insofar it is “founded on ideas,” and, specifically, on moral ones.<sup>40</sup> As an affective state that is founded on moral ideas – including a moral concern for impartiality and equality – it is, in Kant’s view, inherently connected with our rational capacities. Kant’s view is that when we encounter this state in ourselves or another, we may, through a subreption, come to recognize our rational natures, and feel a pleasurable, empowering esteem for ourselves that can contribute to our capacity to act in opposition to our sensible inclinations.

Like the mental state of disappointment with humanity, Kant takes the mental state of enthusiasm to be founded on moral ideas. He defines “enthusiasm” as “the idea of the good connected with affect,” and elucidates this notion partly by contrasting it with fanaticism.<sup>41</sup> Unlike enthusiasm, Kant claims, fanaticism is characterized by delusion, namely “a *delusion* that would *will some VISION beyond all the bounds of sensibility*; i.e. would dream according to principles (rational raving).” Whereas enthusiasm is comparable to “delirium,” fanaticism has a looser tie to reality, and is instead comparable to “mania.” Whereas enthusiasm is “a transitory state to which the healthiest understanding is liable to become at times the victim,” fanaticism is an “undermining disease.”<sup>42</sup> Kant has mixed feelings concerning whether it is healthy for us to feel enthusiasm. We see this ambivalence not only in the third *Critique*, but also, for instance, in his *Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, which addresses the classification of mental disorders. There, he describes enthusiasm as the “appearance of fantasy in

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<sup>40</sup> CJ 5:276.

<sup>41</sup> CJ 5:271-2.

<sup>42</sup> CJ 5:275.

moral sensations that are in themselves good.”<sup>43</sup> Individuals who are “more excited by a moral sensation than by a principle, and this to a larger extent than others could imagine according to their own insipid and often ignoble feeling,” will be widely considered by these others to be fantasists.<sup>44</sup> The “fantast,” he now adds, manifests a type of mental “derangement” in which his or her imagination has taken over.

In spite of his tendency to speak of enthusiasm as if it were a kind of mental disorder, Kant also holds that it can be in some ways beneficial to us. He writes, for example, that “nothing great has ever been accomplished in the world without [enthusiasm].”<sup>45</sup> In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant claims that witnessing the French revolution is apt to raise in “the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm the very expression of which is fraught with danger.” What these onlookers are feeling is ultimately grounded in moral ideas, since genuine enthusiasm, he claims, “always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral, such as the concept of right.”<sup>46</sup> The fact that Kant sees enthusiasm not simply as a “malady of the head,” but also as connected with difficult and dangerous revolutionary acts of resistance grounded in moral concern begins to explain why he takes it to be a sublime mental state. “From an aesthetic point of view,” he writes in the third *Critique*, “enthusiasm is sublime, because it is an effort of one’s powers called forth by ideas which give to the mind an impetus of far stronger and more enduring efficacy than the stimulus afforded by sensible representations.”<sup>47</sup> When we feel enthusiasm or witness it in another, we may be led, through a subreption, to

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<sup>43</sup> *Maladies* 2:267.

<sup>44</sup> *Maladies* 2:267.

<sup>45</sup> *Maladies* 2:267. Cf. *CJ* 5:272.

<sup>46</sup> *Conflict* 7:85.

<sup>47</sup> *CJ* 5:271-2.

recognize our rational capacities, and thereby to recognize an aspect of ourselves that is not bound up with our inclinations.<sup>48</sup>

A final example of a sublime mental state is that of freedom from affect “in a mind that strenuously follows its unswerving principles.”<sup>49</sup> Kant praises apathy in the *Anthropology*, writing that the gift of apathy is a “fortunate phlegm (in the moral sense).” Those who lack the relevant kind of apathy tend to go wrong because they do not reflect sufficiently on their feeling states. Specifically, they do not compare the current feeling “with the sum of all feelings (of pleasure or displeasure).”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant describes moral apathy as a mental state that arises when a person is able to govern internal states through reflection. In this way, the person manages “to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason’s) control and so to rule over himself.”<sup>51</sup> Although apathy, unlike the other sublime mental states that we have considered, is characterized by its lack of affect, sublime mental states all have in common that they are helpful in confronting sensible hindrances. Kant’s underlying thought is that, when we observe ourselves or someone else in a state that is free from affect while also acting in accordance with moral principles, we may be led, as in the other cases, to carry out the subreption that he takes to underlie both the pleasure of sublimity and its potential to foster our moral development.

It may initially seem as if there is little sense to be made of the notion of an experience

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<sup>48</sup> See also Clewis’ examination of some of the potential moral epistemological implications of the thesis that enthusiasm is a sublime mental state. According to Clewis, Kant holds that enthusiasm functions, for instance, as a “morally encouraging sign,” and as a means for us to “recognize the morally good” (Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime*, 3).

<sup>49</sup> CJ 5:272.

<sup>50</sup> *Anthropology* 7:254.

<sup>51</sup> *Morals* 6:408.

of artistic sublimity, especially if we are guided solely by a remark that Kant makes in the course of his discussion of mathematical sublimity in the *Analytic of the Sublime*. There, he advises us not to expect that our engagement with artifacts will yield “pure” experiences of mathematical sublimity, since these are such that “a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude.”<sup>52</sup> A pure experience of mathematical sublimity must, by contrast, have “no end belonging to the object as its determining ground.”

In spite of Kant’s own reservations, his account does, ultimately, seem capable of accommodating experiences of artistic sublimity. First, Kant speaks here only of the impossibility of “pure” experiences of artistic mathematical sublimity. However, there could still be “impure” experiences of mathematical sublimity in response to artworks. In such cases, our pleasure would be grounded partly on our understanding of the object’s internal end.<sup>53</sup> In fact, Kant even discusses two kinds of experiences that appear to constitute examples of impure sublimity: the experiences of the “monstrous” and of the “colossal.” In the case of the monstrous, the object “by its size ... defeats the end that forms its concept.”<sup>54</sup> The object, in other words, seems to be too much for what it is supposed to be.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the colossal, we likewise experience the object as oversized – but not to the extent that we do in the case of the monstrous. The colossal

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<sup>52</sup> CJ 5:252-3. Of course, Kant’s view is that we can experience not just artifacts, but also natural objects as having internal ends, which is why he also maintains that we cannot expect experiences of pure sublimity in connection with natural objects which “*in their very concept import a determinate end,*” including “animals of a recognized natural order” (CJ 5:252-3).

<sup>53</sup> Kant’s own examples of experiences of sublimity reveal that conceptual understanding will in many cases partly ground the pleasure we feel. We often first need to form representations of objects using sophisticated concepts in order to be able to experience them as sublime. For instance, we need to know what kind of thing we are dealing with in order to be able to represent it as fearful, and, consequently, to be able to experience dynamical sublimity as we engage with it. We need to know, for example, that we are dealing with “[b]old, overhanging... threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven.” But making such classifications requires employing sophisticated concepts – including natural kind concepts.

<sup>54</sup> CJ 5:253.

<sup>55</sup> See Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*, 109.

is “almost too great for presentation,” and thus only “relatively monstrous.”<sup>56</sup> In both cases, however, our representing the object’s end is a necessary part of our resulting experience. If it is possible for us to experience impure sublimity insofar as our pleasure is grounded in a teleological representation of the object, this will closely mirror Kant’s claim that it is possible for us to experience dependent beauty insofar as our pleasure is grounded in such a representation.

It is open to Kant to suggest, moreover, that to the extent that an object manifests finality, and so appears to have been made, we may carry out an act of abstraction in order to put ourselves in a position to enjoy experiences approaching those of “pure” sublimity. In fact, Kant suggests that it will sometimes even be necessary to abstract when we seek to experience the sublimity of natural phenomena. In a passage that we alluded to in Chapter 4, Kant writes:

So, if we call the sight of the starry heaven *sublime*, we must not found our judgement of it upon any concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings, with the bright spots, which we see filling the space above us, as their suns moving in orbits prescribed for them with the wisest regard to ends.... Similarly, as to the prospect of the ocean, we are not to regard it as we, with our minds stored with knowledge on a variety of matters (which, however, is not contained in the immediate intuition), are accustomed to represent it in *thought*, as, let us say, a spacious realm of aquatic creatures, or as the mighty reservoirs from which are drawn the vapours that fill the air with clouds of moisture for the good of the land, or yet as an element which no doubt divides continent from continent, but at the

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<sup>56</sup> CJ 5:253.

same time affords the means of the greatest commercial intercourse between them – for in this way we get nothing beyond teleological judgements.<sup>57</sup>

To be thinking, for instance, of the movements of the stars as if they had been preconceived by a cosmic maker, or of the ocean's contribution to the ecosystem as if it had been preconceived by such an agent would be to engage in a type of intellectual activity that is not compatible with the experience of pure sublimity. To avoid these thoughts, we may abstract – in which case we would be experiencing these phenomena “as the poets do, according to what the impression upon the eye reveals.”<sup>58</sup>

Kant himself invokes two artifactual examples in describing the experience of mathematical sublimity: the example of Savary's observations of Egyptian pyramids, and the example of St. Peter's in Rome. When one observes such buildings, one finds that one's cognitive capacities are overwhelmed, and, on the surface, at any rate, Kant seems to be suggesting that these amount to experiences of sublimity – which perhaps suggests that the observer has successfully abstracted from thoughts of the objects as having determinate internal ends.

Kant's primary doubts concerning artistic sublimity occur in the context of his discussion of mathematical sublimity. Even if these doubts are, in the end, to be taken seriously, they do not directly speak against the possibility that we might have experiences of dynamical sublimity or sublimity in internal nature as we engage with artworks. To take just the case of dynamical sublimity, there is every reason to think that it is possible for us to experience an artifact as mighty. Human artifacts can be just as

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<sup>57</sup> CJ 5:270.

<sup>58</sup> CJ 5:270.

destructive to us as natural objects. There is no reason, for example, why an artist could not make a dangerous artwork which spectators experienced as threatening to overpower them. The experience of encountering such an object would be no less overwhelming simply because we knew it to have been designed by a human being. Even literary descriptions of mighty phenomena can seem capable of provoking experiences of sublimity. Along these lines, Kant suggests in the *Observations* that “the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by Milton arouses satisfaction, but with dread.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus, we have at first glance every reason to think that Kant’s theory of sublimity can be developed further than he does so in order to accommodate not just experiences of natural sublimity, but also those of artistic sublimity.<sup>60</sup>

### **By a certain subreption**

If successful, Kant’s account of sublimity will offer a wide-ranging explanation of experiences of sublimity that we may have in response to external nature, internal nature, and artifacts. Most importantly, it will explain why the pleasure of sublimity, in virtue of its connection with the feeling of self-esteem, can contribute to our moral development – that is, it will explain how sublimity prepares us “to esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest,” and how its doing so makes it

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<sup>59</sup> *Observations* 2:208.

<sup>60</sup> See the articulations of Kantian conceptions of artistic sublimity in Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, Chapter 7, and Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime*, 117-125. These constitute novel and interesting developments of Kant’s account, and seem to be, in large part, consistent with the remarks on artistic sublimity in the present work. On Crowther’s articulation, we are apt to experience sublimity while engaging with art if the work is overwhelming in perceptual scale, overwhelming in personal significance, or overwhelming in its embodiment of a general truth. On Clewis’ account, it is possible to experience sublimity in response to vast and powerful human creations, such as skyscrapers.

“final in reference to the moral feeling.”<sup>61</sup>

The trouble, however, is that all of these explanations rest on one crucial, yet phenomenologically dubious claim, namely the claim that a subreption lies at the core of any given experience of sublimity. This is dubious insofar as it certainly does not feel as though we are taking pleasure in an aspect of ourselves – rational or otherwise – while we are experiencing sublimity. Instead, our experience is of being pleased by the object itself. It is, to be sure, a mixed pleasure, since there may be feelings such as fear, insignificance, and desperation mixed in. Kant is right in this aspect of his characterization of the experience. However, it is entirely possible to hold that the experience of sublimity is a mixed one in this way without also holding that the experience is characterized by a split between an outer object, which is displeasing, and an inner object, which is pleasing. Given that Kant’s explanation of the source of the pleasure in an experience of sublimity does not accord with the way things seem to us as we are actually having this experience, we would expect that he would offer us a compelling reason for adopting the explanation. However, he does little beyond asserting it, and when presented with such an assertion, we are bound to be left unconvinced.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Kant cannot, in the end, be said to have established that there is a close connection between the experience of sublimity and a feeling of esteem for our

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<sup>61</sup> CJ 5:267. Crowther’s interpretation of Kant on these points is, broadly speaking, in agreement with the present one. Crowther claims that Kant assumes that “any overcoming of sensibility by reason (in the broad sense of that term) will be of moral significance in so far as it will lead us to take a pleasure in the fact that we are more than creatures of sensibility,” and that this will have the effect of rendering us “all the more liable to follow the precepts of moral reason” (*The Kantian Sublime*, 122).

<sup>62</sup> Malcolm Budd presents a criticism of the Kantian account of sublimity along these lines. According to Budd, Kant’s “identification of pleasure in the sublime as pleasure in the felt realization of our superiority to nature” lacks plausibility, at least if it is supposed to amount to a general explanation of why we feel pleasure while engaging with the kinds of objects under consideration. As Budd puts it, what was very likely a feature of Kant’s own experience “is highly likely to be absent from the experience of many, if not most, of us” (Malcolm Budd, “Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. Part III: the Sublime in Nature,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38, no. 3 (1998): 246).



rational capacities, or to have established that the pursuit of experiences of sublimity is a way of developing morally by enabling us to strengthen our rational self-esteem. This is not to say, however, that the experience of sublimity has no moral significance. Like the experience of beauty, the experience of sublimity is a pleasurable, disinterested experience characterized by detachment from the pleasing object. As Kant puts it, beauty and sublimity “agree on the point of pleasing on their own account.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, these pleasures differ from the pleasures of goodness and agreeableness. Experiences of the pleasure of goodness are characterized by a desire to understand the object to an extent that experiences of beauty and sublimity are not. And whereas the pleasure of agreeableness draws us further into our senses leading us to become more attached to the sensible object and more consumed by inclinations that we have in relation to it, the pleasures of beauty and sublimity enable us to leave our sensory desires aside. Thus, because the experience of sublimity, like the experience of beauty, is an experience that is both disinterested and pleasurable, pursuing it can serve our moral development, providing us with a way of learning to distance ourselves from our inclinations without “too violent a leap.”

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<sup>63</sup> CJ 5:244.