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Kant, the Sublime, and Being Human

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When Paul Guyer surveyed the literature on the sublime about twenty years ago, he noted the flourishing of psychoanalytic and deconstructionist interpretations of the sublime by ‘literary theorists’ and offered his own essay, based on a ‘more literal kind of interpretation of Kant’, as a contribution to a sparsely populated field.¹ Today the situation is reversed. In the field of philosophical aesthetics, understood to include analytic aesthetics as well as theoretical approaches to literary and visual culture, serious doubts have been raised about the coherence of theories of the sublime and indeed the usefulness of the concept. By contrast, the sublime is increasingly studied by Kantians [consider the concept to have an important](#), and in some cases indispensable, [role](#) in his ethics.² The questions the present paper sets out to answer are:

¹ Paul Guyer, ‘The Beautiful and the Sublime’ *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press 1993), pp.187-228, here p.188. The original essay appeared in 1982, the survey was added in the 1993 version. As Guyer comments, that essay represents his re-appraisal of the topic and a revision of his own earlier negative estimation concerning the importance of the sublime especially for a contemporary audience (p.187), see too *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, second edition (Cambridge University Press 1997), pp. 371-2 note 2.

² Examples include [Paul Crowther in *The Kantian Sublime. From Morality to Art* \(Clarendon 1991, originally 1989\)](#); Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason. Kant on Spirit*

Is a coherent theory of the sublime possible? Is the sublime a useful concept? Is the chief interest in the sublime moral? The answers, briefly, are: yes, yes, and no. Although the argument supporting these conclusions focuses on Kant's analysis, the aim is to show [the broader significance of the experience of the sublime and the coherence and usefulness of the concept in this, its broader application](#). To do this the paper combines methodological conservatism, approaching the topic from within Kant's discussion of aesthetic judgement in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, with reconstruction, in particular, the deployment of a conception of human agency that is tenable on Kantian grounds but which is not in Kant's original discussion.

I

That no general theory of the sublime is possible has been recently defended by Jane Forsey, who builds on Guy Sircello's argument that current theories are characterised by incoherence

Generation, and Community (The University of Chicago Press 1996), pp. 210-9; Paul Guyer 'The Symbol of Freedom', Herman Parret ed. *Kants Aesthetik/Kant's Aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant* Berlin: de Gruyter 1997), pp.338-55; Robert R. Clewis *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press 2009), and 'Kant's Distinction Between a True and False Sublimity' in Shell and Velkley eds., *Kant's Observations and Remarks. A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press 2012), pp. 116-43; Melissa Merrit 'The Moral Source of the Kantian Sublime' in T. Costelloe ed., *The Sublime From Antiquity to Present*, (Cambridge University Press 2012), and Donald Loose ed. *The Sublime and Its Teleology. Kant, German Idealism, Phenomenology*, (Brill: Leiden 2012).

and contradiction.³ Sircello interprets claims concerning the elusiveness of the sublime as describing the ‘epistemological transcendence’ of the experience, while at the same time betraying uncertainty about the ontological status of the object which is presented as itself elusive and possibly non-existent. On Sircello’s reading, this is fatal, since to the extent that the experience is described and analysed, theories of the sublime either describe as epistemically accessible an object that is nonetheless ontologically transcendent or they present the object as epistemically accessible and inaccessible at the same time.⁴ Either way it seems no true theory of the sublime can be had. Still, Sircello holds out for the possibility of a theory that would take seriously the topic of epistemological transcendence without attaching it to a possibly non-existent object.⁵ Forsey is more pessimistic, arguing that the epistemological and ontological commitments of *any* putative theory are bound to be in conflict with one another. Forsey’s argument is especially relevant to the present paper since she discusses Kant in some detail. If she is right, of course, no theory is possible and a fortiori no Kantian theory.

A different kind of challenge comes from James Elkins. While acknowledging its importance in discussions about contemporary art, Elkins argues that the sublime ‘is such an intricate

³ Jane Forsey, ‘Is A Theory of the Sublime Possible?’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:4:2007, pp.81-9; Guy Sircello ‘How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?’ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:4:1993, pp. 541-50.

⁴ Sircello op.cit. p.545.

⁵ Sircello op.cit. p.549.

concept that it is effectively useless without extensive qualification'.⁶ He therefore calls for a moratorium on the 'postmodern sublime' and argues for the demotion of 'sublime' to a technical term with specific range of references. How the range is to be specified is a matter for different historical disciplines, but for art historians at least the term will be applicable to a set of romantic and late romantic paintings. Elkins is not antipathetic to the aims of literary and art theory, he simply thinks that the sublime is not the right concept to fulfil these aims, because unmoored from its historically specific reference to aesthetic ideas in the eighteenth century or to German paintings of the nineteenth, it has become hollow: it is 'asked to do too much work for too many reasons'.⁷ It is this diagnosis that prompts Elkins's extensional definition of the sublime. If an alternative account is to be given then, necessary minimal requirements for it must be that the term be clearly defined. The difficulty of course is that the sublime has traditionally been used, as Elkins, Sircello and Forsey all acknowledge, to name an experience that does not lend itself to clear exposition and this affects the definition of the term used to refer to the experience and to characterise its objects. This is where Kant's systematic approach can be helpful. Kant presents the sublime as an element of a theory of judgement, which in turn is intended to show something about our ability to make judgements. Considered as a type of judgement, the sublime can be examined in a

⁶ James Elkins, 'Against the Sublime' in Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd White eds., *Beyond the Finite. The Sublime in Art and Science* (Oxford University Press 2009), pp.75-90, here p.75.

⁷ Op.cit.p.90. On the postmodern sublime, see too James Kirwan, *Sublimity. The Non-rational and the Irrational in Aesthetics* (Routledge 2005) pp.156-7. Elkins attributes the popularity of the sublime to its suggestion of religious content: 'words like sublimity, transcendence, and presence, shrouded in clouds of secular criticism, serve to suggest religious meanings without making them explicit' (p.87).

theoretically controlled fashion (i.e. controlled by the demands of judging precisely), which can bring the requisite clarity to the discussion.

The flourishing of interest in the sublime coming from the Kantian side has explicitly moral aims. As Melissa Merritt puts it, the sublime ‘contributes to the reflective work of critical philosophy by illuminating the moral psychology of the *rational animal*’.⁸ Robert Clewis similarly argues that sublimity is ‘predicated properly not on an objective property but on an idea of reason and especially a moral one’ and goes on to develop a distinct category of the ‘moral sublime’ based on Kant’s treatment of the term from the early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.⁹ Despite their differences, the interpretations by Merritt and Clewis [explain the concept by reference to its role in Kant’s ethics](#) and define it, [through an inward turn](#), as a state of mind or feeling.¹⁰

⁸ Merritt op.cit.p.38.

⁹ Clewis *The Kantian Sublime* p.14.

¹⁰ Merritt is explicitly concerned with moral content op.cit. p.38-9, Clewis with moral freedom op.cit. p.45. Although he is mindful not to moralise the sublime, Clewis introduces the notion of a ‘moral sublime’ which he defines as ‘the effect on consciousness when the moral law, or some representation or embodiment thereof, is observed or perceived aesthetically rather than from a practical perspective’ (op.cit.p.84). He also employs a moral distinction between true and false sublimity; see especially his ‘Kant’s Distinction Between a True and False Sublimity’ p.139. [The first systematic interpretation of the sublime as an element in Kant’s ethics was given by Crowther who argues that the feeling of pleasure and displeasure characteristic of the experience of the sublime is ‘grounded’ in an ‘inexplicit’, yet nonetheless accessible, idea of finality, the finality of reason whose own highest end is morality \(op.cit.101\).](#) Although Crowther finds problems with the way Kant prosecutes his

Straightaway we should note that there are good textual grounds for both interpretative moves.¹¹ Importantly also, the inward turn presents certain theoretical advantages since a theory that concerns itself with states of mind allows its concept to gain specificity and reference, whilst avoiding the pressures confronted by theories that focus on a fundamentally ungraspable object. Clewis in particular develops a nuanced phenomenology of enthusiasm, but also of other feelings, which he assesses according to their moral value and significance.¹² Nonetheless the inward turn is not entirely advantageous. The concern is that the sublime is elbowed out of the discussion in favour of specific feelings, sentiments, emotions, and mental

argument, he does not entertain the possibility that the theory may admit of a non-moral interpretation. Indeed, his own reconstruction is based on the idea that the sublime affords us a morally significant experience of transcendence of the limits of our embodiment (op.cit.147). The agential interpretation pursued here does not necessitate transcendence of the limits of our embodiment merely a more benign view of those limits.

¹¹ Moralised interpretations have strong textual support, including outside the third *Critique*. Famously, when Kant apostrophises duty he calls it ‘sublime’ (5:87) and, later on in the same section of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he argues that the moral law reveals to us ‘the sublimity of our own supersensuous existence’ (5:89). All references to Kant will be given to the volume and page number of the Akademie edition in brackets in the text. The references to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* will also be given, after a comma, to the English translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press 2000).

¹² Clewis *The Kantian Sublime* p.183f; see too Shell op.cit. pp.216-9.

states. If, as Clewis argues, what is important is enthusiasm of the morally correct sort, then whether we also call the experience sublime or not does not seem to matter a great deal.¹³

The absorption of the sublime into ethics is also a concern. If we follow that path, as Forsey argues, the term is of interest to the extent that it helps illuminate Kant's moral theory.¹⁴ If we start with this as the desideratum, this work is undeniably valuable since it shows the importance of aesthetic concepts in Kant's moral philosophy and therefore contributes to the task of uncovering the deep connections his ethics allow between feelings, emotions, and states of mind on the one hand and moral motivation, judgement and self-knowledge on the other. This is an important task because it corrects the received view of Kant's ethics as immune to ordinary moral psychology. Be this as it may, the question remains whether the sublime, in its Kantian interpretation, has independent claims to our attention and a distinctively aesthetic application.¹⁵ [A positive answer depends on showing how the concept](#)

¹³ [The problem is that it is hard to distinguish felt experience *a* \(the sublime\) from felt experience *b* \(moralised enthusiasm\) in fact we are not supposed so to do, because the one is given *as* the other, so unlike other sorts of explanations in terms of the parts or features of the thing explained, here it does not seem possible to predicate different properties to each of the two felt experiences.](#)

¹⁴ [Op.cit. p.385](#)

¹⁵ The interpretation that follows is still Kantian even though rather unorthodox since it plays down the explicit moral dimension of Kant's discussion of the sublime. However, it does not ignore or downplay his references to our rational faculties, rather it offers a translation of talk about our rational faculties and our moral vocation into a vocabulary of agency, and abilities to do with agency, including the ability to set ends, which is of course key to Kant's ethics. The translation makes for a more inclusive theory in which distinctive Kantian moral and

of the sublime fits Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement. This preparatory work, in the next section, forms the foundation for the critical appraisal of the sublime in its systematic context in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, which follows and leads to the reconstructive argument given in the final section. The aim of the reconstructive argument is to show that the sublime describes a complex experience that accompanies the reflective grasp of passive and active aspects of our agency in the context of its worldly exercise.

II

To consider the sublime as an element within the overall argument of the third *Critique* it is to consider it as a judgement. It is a species of aesthetic judgement of the form '... is sublime'. The philosophical task is to understand what that means, including what the appropriate subject term is, and on what grounds the judgement is properly made. For Kant, all aesthetic judgements have a subjective element to the extent that, apart from anything else they do, they express or convey a special kind of felt pleasure, aesthetic pleasure.¹⁶ One idea then, which flows from its aesthetic conception, is that the sublime is pleasurable. But we

metaphysical elements can fit, provided we do not lose from sight the aim of the current paper which is to show that Kant's analysis of the sublime contains a theory that is of broader aesthetic interest. Many thanks to Karl Ameriks for prompting me to clarify this point in discussion.

¹⁶ There is an unresolved issue here, discussed in Guyer *Kant and the Claims of Taste* pp.109-10 and 'The Beautiful and the Sublime' p.213, about the ambiguity between unconscious processes of reflection that produce a feeling and the conscious assessment of that feeling. Resolving this ambiguity is not essential for what follows, what is essential is that the judgement does not simply report a subjective state of affairs.

cannot understand what aesthetic pleasure without getting to grips with the concept of ‘purposiveness’, which Kant uses, among other things, to explain aesthetic pleasure. Understanding purposiveness and how it relates to pleasure will give us the necessary conceptual background for understanding the judgement of the sublime, and especially for appreciating its distinctiveness, which consists in its combination of positive features of purposiveness and pleasure with ‘contra-purposiveness’ (5:245, 129 and 5:259, 142) and ‘displeasure’ (5:257, 141 and 5:259, 142).

In the third *Critique*, ‘purposiveness’ has a role in the discussion of judgments of taste and so in the analysis of the beautiful. It also, however, features in a very abstract discussion about nature contained in the so-called ‘First Introduction’ (20:195-251, 3-50). This is a very substantial and difficult piece on and of systematic philosophy, which contains, appropriately enough, a discussion of the systematicity we expect of nature. So prior to its appearance in the judgement of the sublime, purposiveness features in two very different judgements: the judgement about the systematicity of nature and the judgment of taste. All three, in turn, are sub-types of the general type of judgment Kant calls ‘judgement of reflection’.

For Kant, judgements are the basic elements of cognition. They perform this function by combining concepts and intuitions. Concepts serve as ‘rules’ (A106), Kant says, in that they stand in orderly relations to other concepts so that in making judgements one shows that she is aware of these relations (this is why the outcome qualifies as ‘cognition’). Empirical judgments, such as ‘All bodies are heavy’ (A7/B11), are propositions of attribution of empirical concepts that stand in relations to other empirical concepts, e.g. ‘mass’ or ‘gravity’. A priori synthetic judgements, such ‘Everything that happens has its cause’ (A9/B13), constitute experience, which is to say that the concept of causality is an a priori component of all ordinary as well as scientific cognitions of objects and so it is subject to an a priori

argument that aims to establish our right to apply it to objects. There are cases, however, in which a concept we employ does not stand in the right way within the inferential web of relations, **for** it has **no** ‘rule’, and **so** we have no right to apply it directly to objects. ‘Purposiveness’ is such a concept and the judgement it is part of is a judgement of reflection. By using concepts that are about objects without determining them directly, the new variety of judgement seeks to address reflective cognitive needs we have and which cannot be otherwise fulfilled.¹⁷

In the judgement ‘nature is purposive’ we say something about nature’s systematicity. Like Hume’s principle of uniformity, the judgement captures the idea that nature is amenable to our cognitive efforts. Roughly the thought is this: let us assume that a judgement is possible that has as its task to show the applicability of (ordinary empirical and scientific) concepts to objects. What would fulfil this task is the judgment of purposiveness of nature because the concept that ensures such applicability is ‘purposiveness’. However, ‘purposiveness’ is not a concept we find in nature, nor one that we are entitled to use directly to constitute our

¹⁷ Hannah Ginsborg, ‘Reflective Judgement and Taste’, *Noûs* 24:1:1990, pp. 63-78 makes the case for the ubiquity of judgements of reflection, arguing that they are requires for bringing objects under concepts (p.66) and only in a secondarily do they have a role in higher order organisation. What follows is not necessarily incompatible with Ginsborg’s reading, the aim is to specify what distinctively ‘reflective’ features attach to aesthetic judgements as well as the judgement concerning systematicity such that they warrant grouping them together. Daniel Kolb glosses the **reflectiveness of the judgement of systematicity** as: ‘any conception of the whole that emerges from our reflection on nature is structured by the way that ideas hold together and thematize the movement of the intellect’, ‘Kant, Teleology and Evolution’, *Synthese* 91:1/2:1992, pp.8-28, here p.15.

cognitions of nature. In denying that we can somehow deduce it a priori, Kant is in agreement with Hume and against rationalist pre-established harmony views. The judgement of purposiveness, Kant explains, ‘prescribes not to nature ... but to itself ... a law for the specification of nature’ (5:185-6, 72). By making the justification of purposiveness a matter *internal* to the judgment, Kant seeks to distance his views not just from arguments that nature is in fact orderly (Leibniz), but also from conventionalist views, that orderliness is a feature of our talk about nature only (Locke) or an assumption for the preservation of our cognitive practices (Hume).¹⁸ So with respect to the judgement about the systematicity of nature Kant employs purposiveness to communicate the idea of orderly arrangement of parts within a whole. At the same time, this idea addresses a need we have, in this case to further other cognitive aims (i.e. assure ourselves that nature is knowable), which cannot be fulfilled (i.e. we have no credible guarantees, metaphysical or any other sort).

The same pattern is discernible with respect to judgements of taste, which are of the type ‘... is beautiful’. Although the concept supplied reflectively in this case is ‘beautiful’, ‘purposiveness’ enters into the analysis of the judgment of taste and explains how the judgement both says something about the object we judge beautiful and about the pleasure we take in the beautiful. What Kant emphasises here is that purposiveness is without ‘end’ or purpose (see 5:220, 105). This is puzzling because, as we saw previously, nothing about an end or purpose of nature is implied in or required by the judgement that nature is purposive. Possible reasons why Kant chooses to emphasise the absence of purpose in this context include that he is keen to differentiate his views from those that associate beauty with fitness for a purpose where some further end justifies our judgement that something is beautiful and

¹⁸ The perceived advantage of making it a reflective judgment is modal strength: the requirements of reflection, while subjective, cannot be overridden.

equally, from rationalist accounts in which a concept, for example ‘symmetry’, justifies (or supplies the rule for) the application of the concept ‘beautiful’.¹⁹ More importantly though, the locution ‘purposiveness without purpose’ serves to characterise positively the aesthetic experience and also to say something about the appearance of the beautiful object.

On Kant’s account, purpose is ‘the object of a concept insofar as we regard this concept as the object’s cause (the real ground of its possibility)’ (5:220, 105). Henry Allison glosses this as: ‘product of an intentional causality, one which presupposes a concept of what the thing is meant to be’.²⁰ I doubt that we need the reference to intentionality at this stage. A concept can be the ‘object’s cause’, as Kant says, in the sense employed in ordinary teleological explanations e.g. the eye is for seeing, the roots of the tree are for support and nourishment etc. Each instance of object- ‘eye’, ‘roots’ - is considered purposefully through a concept, ‘seeing’, ‘support’, ‘nourishment’, that is the object’s (final) cause, what it is for. All this makes perfect sense without intentionality. At any rate, Kant introduces the idea of a will that arranges an object ‘in accordance to the representation of a certain rule’, and so what looks like intentionality, later on in the discussion, in relation to the notion of ‘purposiveness concerning form’ (5:220, 105) only to *withdraw* it immediately, leaving us with the thought of something that has the appearance only of being intentionally arranged.²¹ This is not very

¹⁹ The first type is what Kant calls ‘good for something’ or ‘satisfaction combined with interest’ (5:207, 92-3). His dispute with the rationalists is succinctly contained in the claim that the beautiful is a judgement ‘without concepts’ (5:211, 96-7).

²⁰ Henry Allison *Kant’s Theory of Taste* (Cambridge University Press 2001) p.121

²¹ Guyer’s negative argument about the ‘form of finality’ (or form of purposiveness) is useful here see Guyer op.cit. pp.195-6, see too Allison op.cit. pp.137-8. Kant takes out of the pure judgement of taste both will and purpose, which might be fine for non-theistic appreciation of

informative about the object. Kant is deliberately vague, because his core anti-rationalist claim is that no set of properties can provide us with a rule for the application of the predicate ‘beautiful’, or to put it differently, ‘beautiful’ does not stand in the right inferential relations with other concepts, this is how aesthetic judgement qualifies as judgement of reflection. At the same time, beautiful can be ‘explicated’ (see A 728-30/B756-58) through the idea of ‘purposiveness without purpose’, which can be interpreted to mean an appearance of design such that it engages our attention and occasions the ‘harmonious play’ of our cognitive faculties (20:224, 26). The absence of purpose means that we are not seeking to make any direct cognitive gain, learn what the object is good for, compare it with others we encountered previously and come to some conclusion about it. We are cognitively engaged but in an open-ended way.

Why is such purposiveness pleasurable? Pleasure, on Kant’s definition, is ‘a state of mind in which a representation is in agreement with itself’ (20:231, 33).²² If we think of accomplishing a task in those terms, so that what we set out to do is ‘in agreement’ with what we achieve, it is easy to understand why Kant also says that ‘the attainment of a purpose [*Absicht*] is always accompanied by a feeling of pleasure’ (5:187, 73). Although, as we just

the beauty of nature but rather constricting for beautiful works of art. Kant envisages a tight connection between will and purpose (see 5:370), which would explain why he sees taking away the latter requires him to take away the former.

²² Significantly, Kant does not identify pleasure with the occurrence of a sensation, and allows us to consider pleasure also as attendant to the performance of an action without it being identical with the action. For a clear discussion of the problems of sensation theories of pleasure see Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will* (Routledge 2003) pp.89-96. At the same time, Kant not committed to agreement being the whole story about pleasure and aesthetic pleasure in particular so he adds that pleasure and displeasure are ‘felt, not understood; hence they can only inadequately be explained through the influence that a representation has on the activity of the powers of the mind by means of this feeling’ (20:232). I would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for encouraging me to clarify this issue.

saw, beauty does not depend on such attainment, the experience is of pleasure because of another sort of agreement that is specific to it, an agreement among our cognitive faculties in mental state of free play. A more technical way of putting this is that we attain a consciousness of purposiveness (5:220, 105), as the experienced object animates the faculties of imagination and the understanding ‘to an activity that is indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of the given representation, in unison’ (5:219, 104). The notion of unison explains why pleasure is part of the judgement of beauty but also why the ‘agreement’ that characterises pleasure in general is a matter of ‘preserving this state itself’ (20:231, 33). Translating somewhat freely Kant’s technical vocabulary, we can say that when we take pleasure in something or enjoying doing something –say contemplating a beautiful landscape- we are at one with ourselves and do not want to do anything else, it is also to say that we do not do whatever it is we do in order to take pleasure in it, but the doing is the enjoyment of it.

With this understanding of the complexities of purposiveness, as conveying the idea of a certain order in our worldly encounters, of the judgements in which it is properly employed, which fill in a reflective need to characterise their object, and of its relation to aesthetic pleasure through the engagement of our cognitive faculties, we are in a position to understand the positive half of the judgement of the sublime.

III

Kant devotes the introductory section of the ‘Analytic of the Sublime’ to make the point that the judgement of the sublime is a species of aesthetic judgement (§23), before subdividing it to mathematical and dynamic sublime (§24), the first concerning magnitude (§§ 25-27), the

latter power (§§28-29).²³ He concludes with a long ‘General Remark’ on the whole group of reflective aesthetic judgments.²⁴ Our immediate task is to understand the negative elements of the sublime and how they fit with the positive ones.

In contrast with the beautiful, which affords us an experience of pure pleasure as our faculties are harmoniously engaged, with the sublime we find that our imagination is ‘as it were’ violated (5:245, 129).²⁵ And yet, given that the sublime pleases (5:244, 128, see too 5:267,

²³ The distinction between mathematical and dynamic sublime gives a clue to the nature of the experience and the role of our cognitive faculties, understanding, intuition, imagination, in making this judgement, since, the distinction evokes (and revokes) the principles of the understanding, i.e. the axioms of intuition and anticipations of perception which correspond to extensive and intensive magnitudes (A 161/B 202 and A 165/B 207), and the dynamical analogies of experience that concern persistence, succession and simultaneity (A 177/B220).

²⁴ These are: the beautiful, the agreeable, the sublime and also, interestingly, the good considered here in terms of the feeling it excites. Notably absent is the judgement of purposiveness of nature. It is a matter of ongoing controversy in the Kantian literature is whether the judgement of purposiveness of nature has aesthetically relevant features; see Guyer *Kant and the Claims of Taste* p.41, Allison op.cit. p. 56 and p.63. Kant suggests that when we generalise from specific judgements about natural beauties to the ‘self-sufficient beauty of nature’ we use the idea of nature as a ‘system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding, namely that of purposiveness’ (5:246, 129-30); see too ‘we are delighted... when we encounter such a systematic unity among merely empirical laws’ (5:184, 71).

²⁵ The immediate context for this remark is the presentation of a magnitude we cannot comprehend in the mathematical sublime (5:259, 142). The role of the imagination in the

150), this displeasure is also experienced as a positive feeling. But, Kant asks, ‘how can we designate with an expression of approval that which is apprehended in itself as contrapurposeful?’ (ibid.) Confronted with the ‘formless’ (5:244, 128) and the ‘horrible’ (5:245, 129), he answers, the mind ‘is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness’ (5:246, 129). Later on, in the context of mathematical sublime, he explains how the contrapurposeful experience of the impossibility of apprehending absolute vastness in a single intuition does not leave us without resources, but rather it makes vivid to us our capacity rationally to estimate magnitude so that ‘the very same violence that is inflicted on the subject by the imagination is judged as purposive for the whole vocation of the mind’ (5:259, 142).²⁶

There is no mystery then about how two sets of opposites are part of the same judgement: we take pleasure in something contra-purposeful and, therefore unpleasant, by *subsuming* the contra-purposeful in a ‘higher purposiveness’. The sublime is what we might call a complex cognitive emotion attending certain experiences, that is, we perceive a state of affairs in a manner that gives the emotion its character but which is explicable in terms of other features of our psychology, in this case, of our awareness of our higher purposiveness, which allows us to subsume the original negative feeling under a positive one.²⁷ On the subsumptive

dynamic sublime appears initially positive, as when Kant speaks of the ‘elevation’ of the imagination (5:262, 145), whereas later in the ‘General remark’, he speaks of a ‘deprivation of the freedom of the imagination’ and a mental ‘sacrifice’ (5:269, 152).

²⁶ The same move is repeated in the analysis of the dynamic sublime 5:261-2, 145.

²⁷ The pleasure of the sublime Kant says ‘is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of momentary inhibition of the vital powers’ (5:245, 128-9). Merritt’s and Clewis’s moral interpretations are examples of the subsumptive reading.

reading, the judgement of the sublime makes use of three concepts: ‘contra-purposive’ which describes our cognitive failure and expresses our displeasure, ‘purposive’, which is the subsuming concept that allows the overall experience to be described as ‘sublime’.

The judgement looks like a paradigm case of judgement of reflection because it is elicited by a strongly felt cognitive need that is immediately frustrated. In the mathematical sublime, for example, just as we seek to get the measure of something, we experience the aesthetic confinement of our mind (5:259, 143) and so reach to ideas of reason that render this experience ‘purposive for reason’ (5:260, 143). There is a residual worry here that if we interpret this as a judgment relating our overcoming of displeasure by the pleasure of our awareness of our rational faculties, theoretical and practical, we run the risk of psychologising and subjectivising the whole category of judgements of reflection, but this can be put on hold for the moment. The crucial feature is that the object appears to fall out of the picture, not just as is the case with other reflective judgements, but in a much more radical fashion. Whilst we can call objects beautiful, Kant says that we cannot call them sublime ‘true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of one who judges, not in the object in nature’ (5:256, 139).²⁸ The reason for this is the same Sircello identified when discussing

²⁸ See also 5:245, 129, 5:250, 134 and 5:257, 140, and 5:264; 147. The last reference comes from a rather complex comparative analysis of the sublime with respect to the power of nature and the sublimity of religion and its object. Kant starts (5:262, 145) by stating that confronted with the fearsome power of nature we gain satisfaction from our ‘vocation’ which awakens our ‘self-esteem’, then expands this thought outside the aesthetic realm to cover instances of courage and noble behaviour at war (5:263, 146) before then seeking to apply this complex of ideas to our relation to God, who inspires awe but does not or at least ought

other theories, namely that the sublime cannot take sensible form. Because of this, Kant says, ‘we express ourselves incorrectly if we call any object of nature sublime ... We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason’ (5:245, 129, see too 5:250, 134). So it seems that the subsumptive reading requires an inward turn, and that the inward turn licences the subsumptive reading. In any case, there is wide agreement among the commentators that sublimity characterises the mind, rather than external objects.²⁹

Here are reasons not to rest content with neither the subsumptive nor the inward moves. First there is textual evidence that it is the *object* that is ‘yet at the same time represented as purposive’ (5:259, 142) and earlier on he says that ‘the object is represented as sublime in the twofold manner intended [i.e. mathematical and dynamical]’ (5:247, 131). So we cannot simply dispense with object reference. Second the subsumptive reading appears to cancel out the original displeasure, the violence of the immediate encounter with the object.³⁰ Third the inward turn, as we said earlier, makes talk of the sublime somewhat redundant since it is the rich phenomenology of feelings and emotions that yields the requisite results. Fourth, the

not induce in us mere fear (5:264, 147). See note 29 below for an extension of this thought regarding religious experience.

²⁹ Only Guyer puzzles over why Kant allows the object to be the causal subject of the judgement of the sublime yet not its grammatical subject, ‘The Beautiful and the Sublime’, p.218.

³⁰ Alex Neill made this point about the negative valence of the feeling in conversation. This view, which I share, depends on putting weight on Kant’s analysis of the quality of the feeling of the sublime as a feeling of displeasure (5:259, 142).

combination of subsumption and inwardness opens the analysis to the criticism that the sublime is an example of self-absorption or self-aggrandisement.³¹ In response to these concerns, one may emphasise the essential role of the object as cause of the original contra-purposive experience within the subsumptive reading. If the sublime is a complex cognitive emotion then it is a mistake to leave out elements that account for its complexity, and the relation to the object we have in view when we make the judgement would be such an element. This response alleviates the concern with losing the object altogether but does not rescue the subsumptive reading from the most damaging criticisms given in Forsey's paper.

The experience, as presented so far, starts with an encounter with an object, say galaxies and nebulae or the whole of the starry heavens, but then the object does not feature in our judgement '... is sublime' and cannot do so, because it is ungraspable. Kant uses the term 'formless' (5:247, 131) which suggests unsuited to form in the specifically Kantian sense of an experience we cannot properly apprehend spatio-temporally let alone adequately conceptualise. This is an aesthetic failure (i.e. of our intuition) rather than a conceptual failure. We can no more intuit the 'immeasurability of nature' in the mathematical sublime

³¹ See Kirwan *Sublimity* p.66. See too Carolyn Korsmeyer's criticism of the 'experience of paradoxical mastery' afforded by moving one's attention from the external object and towards one's autonomous self, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Routledge 2004), p. 136. Moral interpretations are not necessarily immune to this problem for individuals can unfortunately be conceited about their moral vocation. A theistic option, based on Kant's discussion of power (5:263-4, 146-7) would escape this stricture, it would however make the sublime a proxy for religious experience; see Rudolf Otto *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans., John Harvey (Oxford University Press 1957).

(5:261, 145) than we can the power of nature in the dynamic sublime -indeed, Kant says, we do not witness nature's power as such at all, we only cognise specific sequences of natural phenomena, such as hurricanes and the devastation they leave behind (5:261, 144). It looks then as if the theory commits us to having an experience of something that fails to meet the minimum requirements for something to be an object of experience. The subsumptive reading requires this because it is precisely this failure that triggers the retreat inward, and the reflective estimation of the capaciousness and might of our reason. It is only then that the proper object of the sublime emerges, namely ourselves under the description of rational beings, who are capable of rising above our sensible existence by virtue of our reason. It is not the mountains and the oceans and the starry heavens that are sublime but ourselves under a certain description, as 'noumenal' selves. But this new object too is unknowable, it is a concept, 'noumenon' which renders the understanding to which it would belong 'itself a problem' (A 256/B311) because it refers to an object 'the possibility of which we cannot in the least represent' (A 256/B312). So whichever way we go, Forsey's strictures apply, the theory contains an ontological claim, 'it represents something as existing that is inaccessible to our cognitive faculties but to which our experience of sublimity is directed'.³² Unlike other theories Forsey and Sircello survey, Kant's does not maintain that we have direct experience of a transcendent object, but, while it emphasises cognitive failure, and the epistemic limitations this reveals, it does contain what look like ontological commitments to a transcendent reality. One way round this is to moralise the subsumptive reading and give a fully moral account of the self as object of sublime feeling and judgement: we are superior to nature through our moral personality, which we know through the moral law. This solution would make the sublime an appendix to Kant's moral theory.

³² Forsey op.cit. p.385.

IV

An outline of a theory that does not incur awkward ontological commitments and explains the sublime without moralising it is presented by Malcolm Budd. Budd focuses explicitly and analyses in detail our experience of nature showing how it can motivate the kind of judgement Kant describes. Importantly, Budd then analyses the experience of our insignificance or vulnerability when confronting nature's power and vastness without offering an escape inwards and upwards.³³ He argues that this negative experience undercuts 'the normal sense of our being in the world' causing a 'sudden dropping away... of our everyday sense of our self and its numerous concerns' which 'after the initial shock, [is] experienced with pleasure'.³⁴ This description is resonant and appealing. However it raises a question about the source of this pleasure. The initial experience is of 'an unpleasant

³³ The realization of our inadequacy 'is forced upon us by confrontation with an appropriate natural phenomenon', Malcolm Budd 'Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. Part III: The Sublime in Nature' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 1998: 38:3, pp. 233-50, here p.244. Kant does not consider exclusively natural phenomena in his treatment of the sublime; see Clewis 'Kant's Distinction Between a True and False Sublimity' p.120. Kirwan re-interprets the sublime as a judgement of taste to avoid tying it too closely to the objects specified in the tradition, James Kirwan, *The Aesthetic in Kant. A Critique*, (Continuum 2004), p.71. The current interpretation remains agnostic about sublime artefacts and works of art.

³⁴ Budd op.cit. pp.245-6. Budd appears to endorse a subsumptive reading: having analysed the negative and positive 'hedonic reactions', he sees 'the negative leading to the positive' and explains this in terms of a 'compensatory realization' of our superiority over the natural world p.244.

awareness of the inadequacy of our sensory or physical power'.³⁵ Why is this pleasurable rather than scary or infuriating? We do not ordinarily experience humility or vulnerability with pleasure. Budd implies that it is our acceptance of humility and vulnerability that gives us pleasure. If so we need to know the reason for this. One may, for example, have a sense of being part of a providential order of things or a quasi-moral commitment to acceptance of one's finitude as a virtue or something along those lines. Budd does not provide this further account (and if he did, then the theory would be an appendix to this other account of a life worth living). The temptation here is to psychologise the experience of the sublime, that is, to focus on Budd's description of the dropping away of our daily tasks, involvements, plans and its disconcerting yet pleasurable character. If we did this, however, then the external object would be unimportant, since the explanatory and descriptive weight would be borne by the psychological history and complexion of the subject and her ability to have such an such experience irrespective of what triggers it. As a result, we would have no reasons, apart from inherited historical ones, to limit Budd's version of the sublime to the sorts of objects Kant limits it to.³⁶

Retaining elements of Budd's interpretation, his focus on nature and his description of the experience on the basis of which we make the judgement of the sublime, we can now construct an alternative. When we judge something sublime, Kant says, we find there is 'nothing purposive in nature itself, but only in the possible use of its intuitions to make palpable in ourselves a purposiveness that is entirely independent of nature' (5:246, 130). Let us start by noting certain parallels with other judgements of reflection. First, purposiveness is

³⁵ Budd op.cit. p.244.

³⁶ Kant accepts that the judgement requires culture but denies that it is merely conventional (5:265: 148-9).

used to address cognitive needs that arise from engagement with objects (so far these are specific objects in the judgement of taste, nature as such in the judgement of systematicity). Second, such judgements do not involve the discovery of some concept in the object; purposiveness is employed concurrently with the explicit denial that there is any higher purpose or end (posited a priori or known empirically). Insofar as the sublime belongs to this family of judgements we are not free to slot in the idea of our rational or moral calling as that which makes sense of the experience by providing us with a purpose. Kant states explicitly that the judgement of the sublime is pure, that is, ‘not mixed up with anything teleological’ (5:252, 136). So what we need to explain is what is ‘purposive’ about our experience of the sublime (5:253-4, 136-7). Taking the quote just given above (5:246, 130), the proposal is to read the clause introduced by ‘but only...’ appositionally, as providing clarification of the negative statement that there is ‘nothing purposive in nature’.

The contra-purposive element describes a cognitive failure and expresses our displeasure. The object we seek to judge eludes and overwhelms us. The judging and experiencing subject is here passive, not just in that she makes use of her receptive abilities, but in that she finds these to be limited; this is what we characterised earlier as an aesthetic failure. At the same time, an active conception is at work: there is ‘nothing purposive in nature itself, but only in the possible *use* of its intuitions to make palpable in ourselves a purposiveness that is entirely independent of nature’ (5:246, 130). Purposiveness is connected here explicitly with a possible use the subject may make of the experience (order to be created so to speak). Use, however, suggests having some end or purpose in view. Yet adducing any such would spoil the judgement (it would not be ‘pure’ in Kant’s terms). Here is a way of squaring these references: if we *qua* judges and passive recipients of the experience also feature in the judgment of the sublime, as Kant says, it is possible that we also feature in it as agents. Let us

make clear the antecedent first: that we feature in the judgement is the novelty introduced by the judgement of the sublime, which speaks not just of the object but also of our engagement with it as judges. The oddity of the judgement is that the subject term of ‘... is sublime’ refers to the object and to the self-aware experience of the judging subject. It becomes less odd if we think of the object as triggering this self-awareness through its thwarting of our exercise of our cognitive powers. More positively, the passivity we experience, the ‘resistance to the interest of the senses’ (5:267, 150), addresses us directly and simultaneously as agents, minimally as subjects trying to get to grips with something (mathematical sublime) and as subjects whose prospects of satisfaction out of pursuit of any ends is threatened (dynamical sublime). What is thereby thwarted and threatened however is acknowledged, we *are* beings capable of estimating our world in light of ends we contemplate and we are capable of acting to achieve them. In the ordinary run of our lives, we do not have experiences that make vivid these features to us (the combination of theoretical and practical abilities) and do so in the right measure (the combination of limits and abilities). The experience of the sublime requires an object that can stop us in our tracks and thereby heighten what is fundamentally a basic and rather ordinary sense of agency, at any rate one that does not require any untenable ontological commitments to a transcendent reality.

Why should this experience be accompanied by a feeling of pleasure? As we saw earlier, although Kant connects attainment of purpose with pleasure, he also envisages a species of pleasure, namely aesthetic, which can be described as fulfilling without requiring the notion of fulfilling an aim, in the judgement of the beautiful it consists in being in a certain state of animation and free play. Ordinarily, we get pleasure from exercising our agency when we succeed in doing whatever it is we set out to do. In the judgement of the sublime, pleasure comes from the mere thought that we have the capacity for agency. The physical and sensory

inadequacies of the experience remind us that our abilities to accomplish our aims are limited. Ordinarily when we encounter obstacles to our projects, aspirations, and powers, we experience this limitation as vulnerability. The experience is contra-purposive, almost in a literal sense, since we fail to accomplish what we set out to do. [It is an experience is of](#) our limitations without the depressing sense of failure attendant to specific attempts to do things that prove beyond us. The judgement says something about the object, that the world is not aligned to our purposes, and something about ourselves, that we are therefore limited. But the context is a contemplative rather than directly agential. The pleasure comes from getting momentarily the right measure of our standing in the world: we are finite, not just that we are not all powerful, but that the world does not have us at its centre – a glimpse at the objective view let us say- all the same there is relief in this in that we are not in charge of and responsible for everything and at the same time, since our identity as purposive beings persists and remains intact, it is also true that there are things that *are* in our power to do.

Although it makes use of the same basic concepts, contra-purposive, purposive, and sublime, as the subsumptive reading, this interpretation does not require that we seek re-assurance in something in us, when confronted with the terrifying object. Rather we see ourselves *in* a certain way *as* part of the world. The interpretation is best characterised as integrative: it integrates different aspects of ourselves –passive and active, being finite and also capable of setting ends- and of our experience, as part of the natural world and responsive to it as we set ends in accordance to our own ideas. This resonates with a philosophically unadorned sense of agency but also with Kant's characterisation of human beings as natural and rational creatures. Most importantly, whilst having its roots firmly in Kant's analysis it shows the wider importance of a distinctly aesthetic sublime.