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BOOK REVIEW

Robert R. Clewis: *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. xiii + 258, £55.00 (hb.). ISBN: 978-0-521-51668-6

This book distinguishes itself by aiming to provide a comprehensive reading of the Kantian sublime that considers both the ‘aesthetic’ and ‘moral’ modes of the sublime in relation to one another. Clewis complains that existing interpretations tend either to ‘aestheticize’ or else to ‘moralize’ the Kantian sublime: that is, to treat one or the other mode as primary, and so to reduce the one to the other. Clewis hopes to remedy this by giving special attention to *enthusiasm*, which he takes to be a mode of the Kantian sublime admitting of both ‘aesthetic’ and ‘practical’ subspecies. He then attempts to draw out the political and moral implications of enthusiasm by considering Kant’s apparent endorsement of enthusiastic spectatorship of the French Revolution. Although he begins with Kant’s pre-critical view of the sublime from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), Clewis focuses on Kant’s critical-period view, considering both our appreciation of the sublime in nature and art, as well as the sublimity of moral feeling. The final two chapters address enthusiasm.

One of the more instructive contributions of the book is its attention to the differences between *Enthusiasmus* and *Schwärmerei* – terms which are often confused, since both are typically rendered as ‘enthusiasm’ in translation. *Schwärmerei*, for Kant, is indicative of the most extreme disregard for the ideals of enlightenment, or *Aufklärung*. Kant consistently links it with superstition and the presumption to have insight into what lies beyond the bounds of possible experience. For example, someone who claims to appreciate the effects of grace on his own soul is guilty of *Schwärmerei* (*Religion* 6: 53), not *Enthusiasmus*. By contrast, according to Clewis, *Enthusiasmus* can play a legitimate and benevolent role in our moral development.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with Clewis’ account of the Kantian sublime, many of which stem from his overly sanguine view of enthusiasm. Kant discusses enthusiasm in just one passage of the *Critique of Judgment*, the ‘General Remark’ appended to the Analytic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgement. There, Kant notes that enthusiasm ‘seems to be sublime’ (5: 272). The ‘seems’ here has suggested to many commentators (myself included) that enthusiasm is not a genuine mode of the Kantian sublime. Enthusiasm is an uplifted state of mind, and therefore can be

considered a species of the sublime. (The German term for the sublime, *das Erhabene*, derives from *erheben*, to raise or lift up.) Indeed, Kant's point in the passage would seem to be that a person in the throes of enthusiasm has not, as it were, raised up her own mind for herself. This is suggested by Kant's gloss on enthusiasm as 'the idea of the good with affect'. Affect, Kant goes on to explain, is 'that movement of the mind which makes it incapable of free reflection upon principles [*freie Überlegung der Grundsätze*]' (5: 272). Affect is an overwhelming onrush of feeling that renders our critical and reflective capacities momentarily inoperative (see also *Anthropology* 7: 251–67, *passim*).

The notion of reflection is of absolutely fundamental importance to Kant's conception of enlightenment: only by being reflective can we cultivate sound moral disposition and healthy understanding. This is not the place for detailed examination of Kant's theory of reflection. It should suffice to recall Kant's most basic account of reflection in the *Jäsche Logic*. To be reflective, Kant suggests, is to be on guard against having one's own thinking overtaken by the mechanisms of prejudice, the sources of which are said to be 'imitation, habit, and inclination' (9: 76). Practices of judgement require one to consider the source of one's taking things to be a certain way – to consider whether it lies in the affective conditioning of prejudice, or whether it lies in a free exercise of one's own cognitive capacity. Hence, Kant speaks of a 'duty' to reflect, and claims that all judgements 'require a reflection' (see also A261/B317). In short, a reflective individual acknowledges the importance of making up her own mind.

Therefore, when Kant says that enthusiasm is the idea of the good with affect, and immediately goes on to note that a subject in the throes of affect is unable to *reflect*, he means that the enthusiast has given over his mind to someone else. Perhaps one is pushed along by a genius of political theatre to look up to a loftily vague conception of the good. Rousing cheers and silken banners make one excited, inducing 'an agreeable exhaustion' that Kant likens to having one's muscles worked over by a masseur (5: 273–4), but for Kant, 'whatever does not originate from [the agent] himself and from his own freedom provides no remedy for a lack in his morality' (*Religion* 6: 3). How, then, is enthusiasm supposed to contribute to our moral development if it renders inoperative our capacity for free reflection upon principles?

Another difficult passage for Clewis' reading concerns the corrupting role of enthusiasm in moral pedagogy. In Kant's view, we must be very careful with the use of models of virtue in moral pedagogy. Educators often attempt to 'captivate' their young charges by 'inspiring enthusiasm [*Enthusiasmus*]' for noble and meritorious characters, when their charges 'are still so backward in observance of the commonest duty and even in the correct estimation of it' (5: 157). A corrupting moral pedagogy encourages the young to hanker after 'high-flown, puffed-up' images of virtue when they still have no appreciation of workaday honesty – of what morality *requires of them*. Enthusiasm encourages a kind of fantasy morality, Kant says; and

it is dangerous because it undermines the development of a reflective disposition. Clewis hopes to avoid the difficulties of this passage by claiming that while enthusiasm can surely be put to pernicious ends, it is in itself merely ‘morally ambiguous’ (179). However, this is not a view Kant could take, even if we should suppose, for the sake of argument, that enthusiasm could be a tool of the wisest and most benevolent pedagogue. 95

When Clewis suggests that enthusiasm has a role to play in our moral development, he thereby supposes that Kantian morality is at least as much about spectatorship as it is about agency. This is simply not the case, and Kant clearly points out the dangers of training the young for mere moral spectatorship (5: 160). This does not mean that examples, or models of virtue, have no role to play in Kantian moral pedagogy. Examples are prominent in Kant’s moral philosophy, and indeed quite ‘sublime’ or awe-inspiring ones, like the man who refuses to bear false witness against an innocent person, even on pain of his own death (5: 155 ff.). Kant takes pains to instruct us on the proper handling of such examples in a pedagogical context: he shows how the example should be worked up in stages *precisely so that* the pupil maintains his grasp of the principle of duty operative throughout. (Initially, the man is to suffer mere inconvenience for his honesty; only in the final iteration of the story does he face death). In Kant’s view, sound moral pedagogy should continually strengthen the pupil’s grasp of the fundamental concept of *duty* – what morality requires of us all, even in the most humdrum circumstances. Clewis is wrong to suppose that under benevolent tutelage, a pupil is ‘intended to reach ... a moral destination’ through enthusiastic admiration of exemplars, or ‘a merely aesthetic experience of the moral sublime’ (85). An enlightened pedagogy teaches the pupil to be reflective, and to realize that only she could possibly make herself good. 100 105 110 115

To understand Kant’s designation of enthusiasm as ‘aesthetically sublime’ (5: 272), it might help to bear in mind the distinction that Kant often draws between *aisthesis* and *logos* – i.e. between what has its source in our own receptivity, versus what has its source in the spontaneity of reason. Enthusiasm is sublimity through *aisthesis*. However, Kant’s preoccupation throughout the critical philosophy is with the spontaneity of reason, broadly understood. Thus, the ‘logically’ sublime is the genuine Kantian sublime – *genuine*, I say, because it is the mode of the sublime that depends upon the subject’s grasp of a rational principle, namely the moral law. Both moral feeling and the appreciation of the sublime in nature are sublime in the ‘logical’ sense. As Clewis recognizes, a subject’s enjoyment of the sublime in nature does not involve having the moral law in view. This explains why it is said to be ‘disinterested’. Such enjoyment does depend, in Kant’s view, on a background consciousness of the moral law that is coeval with the development of a free power of choice. This is why Kant considers the judgement concerning the sublime in nature under the rubric of his critical philosophy, and this is why he mentions enthusiasm only in passing, in order 120 125 130 135

to set it aside as irrelevant to the critical project. The attention that Clewis gives to enthusiasm simply does not advance his aim to 'explore how . . . the experience of the sublime is related to the notion of freedom' (45).

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