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Liberal Naturalism, Aesthetic Reflection, and the Sublime

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I Introduction: liberal naturalism and a *perceptual affordance*

The standard scientific naturalism and much empirical analytical philosophy modelled upon it, would reduce normative entities like value and meaning to physical laws governing bodies and the brain. This picture of the world acknowledges the laws and entities of the hard sciences such as physics as the most objective, true and actual image we have of the world.¹ According to this view, other levels of explanation such as those whose terms are conceived to interpret and explain phenomena at the level of mind, meaning, and morals can only be explained as pseudo-images of the world. Philosophers who accept this hierarchy refer to theories of mind, meaning, and morals as error-theories whose objects of focus can be referred to as queer objects, and the processes by which these objects engage us as non-cognitive.

Liberal naturalism, in contrast, is a philosophical position which places such normative entities within the realm of nature. The methodology is largely analytic-empirical involving conceptual analysis and explanatory theory compatible with, rather than reduced to, contemporary evolutionary theory and cognitive science; hence the emphasis on *experience*.² R. F. Crespo puts this in terms of the first person perspective, and argues, the 'first person perspective' cannot be grasped by a restricted naturalism, and it justifies the use of a liberal naturalism standpoint. Typically, liberal naturalism upholds

that some things are evidently shown by our everyday experience, from a first person or 'common sense' perspective, and cannot be reached by the methods of natural sciences, a 'third-person' perspective.³

A philosophy of *experience* treats seriously how we feel, emote, and what motivates us, and the contingencies involved in what we know and consider right and good.

On the face of it, this may sound like business as usual for aestheticians. Afterall, isn't this what most analytic philosophers of art assume: that there are different levels of explanation even though they each defer to compatibility with the scientific world-view. So how does enunciating the tenets of liberal naturalism change any of that? In fact, the reductive impulse of scientific naturalism has so consumed and dominated philosophical thinking over the past century that the very terms we use to think about such aspects of experience as meaning, value and pleasure are depleted of much of their content.

Philosophical aesthetics is a case in point.

Metaphysicians and epistemologists grounded in scientific naturalism have arguably dominated the philosophical scene for the last century. This has had consequences for the shape of topics and debates that have characterised philosophy and in particular, philosophical aesthetics. Philosophical aesthetics has been forced to operate as a kind of error theory, its objects treated as non-existent or superfluous, and the defining mental processes engaged by aesthetic objects as non-cognitivist. Aestheticians have either adopted terms more or less defined by such classifications, or alternatively, introduced convoluted strategies to reduce relevant items to scientific entities. The interpretations developed or facilitated through a more liberal naturalism must of course be compatible with scientific enquiry into mind and brain, but the level of explanation appropriate to understanding the objects in question is the level of intentional objects rather than physical

structure or computation. To say for example, that particular neurons, neural structures or even certain computational functions are activated while enjoying the view or while engrossed in a fiction, does not contribute anything to the kind of understanding with which philosophical aesthetics is concerned. Pleasure, for example, is assumed by the more restricted naturalism to be a basic sensation; the kind of sensation we would share with other animals. The extent of its efficacy is to instinctively draw us toward its brute source and away from its opposite. Treating pleasure as an irreducible aspect of experience is taken straight from scientific naturalism. However, it does not take particularly keen observational skills to notice that different culturally based behaviours suggest that we learn to take pleasure in certain things, and our pleasures can be composed of various associations, attitudes and ideas surrounding their objects. In other words, pleasure can be intentional. In philosophical aesthetics this is an idea that fails to gain much traction largely because the domain is dominated by attempts at analytical respectability. The approach taken is to toe the line of thought which reduces pleasure to a non-cognitively generated sensation and hence avoid any conception whose terms might sound in error or queer to the scientific naturalist's ear. For such an aesthetician, mental states such as "intentional pleasure" that are not limited to the terms of scientific explanation simply do not exist. In contrast, liberal naturalism according to John McDowell who coined the term, does not require the integration of all our capacities into a narrow scientific framework.⁴ Instead, in defence of trusting our observations, David Macarthur writes:

A more plausible naturalism [than the standard scientific naturalism] would not begin by dogmatically assuming that nature is exhausted by a restrictive conception of scientific nature – posited by successful scientific theorizing – if for no other reason than that naturalism rightly aspires to rid philosophy (so, of course, itself) of a priori

dogmatism – what Quine rightly castigates as ‘first philosophy’ – in favor of more practice-based empirically sensitive conceptual thinking.⁵

I will argue that once aesthetic experience is clearly analysed in terms of a more liberal naturalism, the result is that the conceptual shackles imposed by notions of error theory, queer objects and non-cognitivism (the philosophical implications of scientism) are removed to reveal new understandings of key concepts in aesthetics.

We can begin by drawing an analogy between an ethical liberal naturalism and an aesthetic liberal naturalism. According to Hans Fink, there are several forms of naturalism, and he follows McDowell in arguing that “one specific form of naturalism which is very common in modern philosophy, ... [is] based on an unduly restricted conception of nature and bound to misrepresent the ethical” and we might add, bound to misrepresent the aesthetic. And this is scientific naturalism. Fink writes that:

An ethical naturalist is someone who insists on a fundamental continuity between the ethical and the natural. Ethical values or norms can and should be accounted for within the realm of nature and in terms of or based on ordinary natural facts.”⁶

The same could be claimed for aesthetic values. However, as Hilary Putnam has argued, scientific naturalism finds no place for such unobservable objects as values and mind.⁷ In this paper, I will refer to the narrow and restricted kind of naturalism, as the scientific image.

The scientific image treats aesthetic experience as a matter of private reverie or mindless gratification of some kind. The aesthetic experience by this image is just a feel-good state understood in terms of individual brains. An interesting upshot of this is the chasm that grew up between the twentieth century formulations of aesthetic terms compared with earlier understandings. A key aspect of aesthetic experience which

interested those eighteenth-century philosophers responsible for setting an agenda for philosophical aesthetics, and carried through by later philosophers and poets who wrote essays on their practices in the nineteenth century, was that aesthetic experience involves a process like perception or a judgment which structured the subjective in terms of certain objective constraints. The details as theorized varied between writers but generally entailed comparisons and the concepts of enculturated persons. Without taking on the various metaphysical commitments of their eighteenth and nineteenth-century authors, we can still recognize the cognitive and intentional aspect of their construal of aesthetic experience.⁸ For example, according to Immanuel Kant, the *pleasure* that accompanies the representations of aesthetic reflective judgment is a kind of cognition (as opposed to a sensation).⁹ As argued above, an aesthetician shaped by the philosophical assumptions of reductive scientific naturalism simply cannot understand this. In contrast, a liberal naturalism demonstrates much greater explanatory power for how we engage with the world and develop cultural objects. Once intentionality is woven through our responses, aesthetic experience can be understood as cognitive in contemporary terms.

The reductive tendencies which took hold in twentieth century philosophy led to aesthetic experience being treated as non-cognitive. Ironically, the conditions were then set for the rise of “cognitive aesthetics” which attempts to gain some respectability for aesthetic engagement by changing the object of aesthetic experience to literal or scientifically reducible content. But this approach distorts the objects and processes of aesthetics by mistakenly accepting the way feelings and attitudes are caricatured as almost epiphenomenal by the scientific image. An aesthetics which understands value and meaning as foundational rather than secondary does not need a theory of “cognitive aesthetics” because all aesthetic experience can be understood accurately to be intentional.

Liberal naturalism is not a new approach; one could cite a number of recent philosophers who work in this vein such as Stanley Cavell, McDowell the later Putnam. They all recognize that their approach introduces an alternative type of naturalism to scientific naturalism.¹⁰ And there is a case to mount for interpreting many historical philosophers in terms of liberal naturalism as for example regarding the most influential aspects of Kant's aesthetics.¹¹ Nonetheless, it took David Macarthur and Mario de Caro to bring its tenets into focus as a distinct metaphysical position and to articulate its philosophical relation to the scientific image. Macarthur argues that "getting clear about the 2nd person stance and what it makes available provides a way of exploring the realm of natural (i.e. non-supernatural) non-scientific items that liberal naturalism makes newly available."¹² By second person, Macarthur aims to draw out "an intersubjective form of intelligibility"¹³ according to which the agent's perspective is as explanatory of our reality as the explanatory concepts of science.

Arguably an exemplary concept conceived in terms of a more liberal naturalism is the concept of *perceptual affordance*. This has a long history, but can reasonably be understood to have taken its place in mainstream vision-theory through James J. Gibson's 1966 book *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*. It is the idea that an object is not just perceived in terms of sensuous properties like shape and form, but also in terms of the possibilities it offers for the perceiver. I will refer to the latter as involving a blueprint for action. So according to the theory of *perceptual affordance*, object recognition does not simply entail labelling an object with a correct name but in addition to this, responding to the blueprint of action that it affords. Ripe fruit suggests eating, a baby kitten warm regard, an injured person sympathy or assistance and so on. The situation may prevent actual active response – the ripe fruit may be on the desk of your bank manager - but the affordance, as

Gibson explained it, entailed this blueprint. As such, a concept of any object includes the actions it motivates or the orientation it prompts.

The aesthetic concept which is the topic here is arguably the most foundational of *perceptual affordances*. The kind of action and orientation that it indirectly motivates is required for the kind of complex sociability required of human cultures. Perceiving an object as sublime involves existential themes. Under liberal naturalism, certain key aesthetic concepts such as the sublime take on a new significance, because they represent the process whereby meaning and significance are ascribed to objects.¹⁴ Gibson's affordance was something that evolved in an enculturated person over-time as they interacted with the environment under adaptive pressures (those who perceived fruit as occasions for sustenance lived long enough to reproduce etc) but importantly also incorporated cultural norms into the blue print for action that the object afforded. In the case of aesthetic experience of the sublime, the affordance is an underlying attitude to the relation between the world, ourselves, and others. As such, analyzing the sublime in terms of a *perceptual affordance* reveals that our experience of the sublime like other idea-generating aesthetic experiences expresses our rationally normative relation to the world.

The experience of the sublime motivates a feeling of respect and responsibility through a particular kind of pleasure. This is an intentional pleasure; a pleasure understood as such by liberating naturalism from a dogma that would reduce aesthetic pleasure to instinct. It was the normative aspect in the way in which our pleasures could be cultivated as demonstrated by the sublime, which would seem to have interested Immanuel Kant and which continues today to motivate philosophical commentary on the sublime by many Kant scholars. However, many contemporary debates are hampered by unacknowledged variations between the relevant background theories held by the protagonists, on topics like

pleasure, imagination, and perception. By treating the sublime as a *perceptual affordance* I avoid the contortions which arise from attempting to reconcile perception with the ascription of values and ideas; that is, I avoid the theoretical difficulty of explaining how the world can be perceived as amenable to our hopes and ideals.

In this chapter we will consider how treating the sublime as a *perceptual affordance* clarifies the historical approaches which treat the sublime as an experience of our agency and avoids the reductive thrust of many influential twentieth century theories in the philosophical literature which are hampered by reductive notions of pleasure and reflection. The benefit of accounts which recognize their foundations according to liberal naturalism, is that the feeling involved in such experiences can be conceived as interwoven and shaped by cognition. This provides a basis for remapping certain key terms in philosophical aesthetics. As such, the theory of the sublime provided here, demonstrates the greater explanatory power of liberal naturalism in contrast to a bald scientific naturalism.

The arguments of the following sections will include a reframing of reflective judgment in terms of perceptual affordance (section 2); intentional pleasure (section 3); non-perceptually represented perceptual properties (section 4); and intersubjectivity (section 5). Finally an account of the way this re-envisaging of the relevant terms results in an economy of means for linking the sublime and moral motivation is provided (section 6) before drawing together the strands of each section to reveal a liberal naturalist account of the sublime.

II Reflective judgment

The way we currently understand the nature of the sublime is attributed in broad outline to Kant's account in the late eighteenth century. The focus is typically on the non-cognitive

aspect included in the standard interpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory but the interpretation provided here shifts this emphasis somewhat by noticing how the relation Kant articulated between various kinds of judgments includes a type of judgment which arguably translates as a *perceptual affordance*; and so in our current framework, a cognitive judgment. While Kant adopted the descriptions of the sublime from other philosophers such as Edmund Burke¹⁵, he reasoned what would need to be the case regarding the system of the mind in order for such experiences to be possible. In doing so, he contributed a refinement to what was noticed about the sublime, and what was considered meaningful and significant about such experiences.

Kant saw in the sublime the human capacity for awe and wonder but with an interesting twist. He thought the awe and wonder while prompted by a natural object initially had a sobering quality to it, which we nonetheless enjoyed on some level due to the particular type of narratives we typically conjured in response. As such the sublime was not a sensation but a judgment. Kant uses the term "judgment" not to denote a measure, grading or final evaluation, but rather to denote a particular kind of intellectual operation that is conditioned upon having had prior cognitively shaped cultural experiences.

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of judgment, one determinate, and the other reflective. A determinate judgment involves identifying something in the world; picking something out. This is possible according to Kant in virtue of a concept we hold of the thing picked out. The process of perceiving the thing involves subsuming the visual array under this concept. It is the concept which both selects or registers the relevant details and presents the item to us in a way by which it acquires meaning for us.

In reflective judgment, on the other hand, one looks but without the kind of focus which predetermines what one perceives. So while in determinate judgment *it is as if* one

simply registers what is out there; in contrast, in reflective judgment *it is as if* the meaning and significance of the object is ascribed by us, providing the object with its significance for us. Most importantly, the experience though engaging a heightened form of subjectivity, feels as though it is objectively significant, that is, almost as though the object were expressive of the ideas we summon forth.

Among reflective judgments Kant distinguishes three kinds: judgments of beauty, judgments of the sublime and judgments of *purposiveness*. Another way of thinking about these reflective kinds of judgment is that they involve ascriptions which fall into general categories that are applied universally. "Ascriptions" are applications of meaning and significance, as opposed to straightforward descriptions or referents. That is, we should think of them as resulting not in perceptual givens as we do in the case of objects like tables and chairs (albeit with their particular "affordances"), but rather more fundamental perceptual conditions that we apply universally such as finding the world conducive to our interests (beauty); finding that our humanity allows us a freedom not available to non-human life (the sublime); or that the world is knowable and we have a desire and means to know it (*purposiveness*). In other words "ascriptions" involve evaluative content: the attitudes and orientations we bring with us that constitute in part the meaning we give to the object. An "ascription" is not a label, nor is it simply a blueprint for action if this is conceived as formulaic; but rather, an orientation without which any blueprint for action would not take hold. In cases of the sublime, it is not simply that the object is a functional object like a chair (whose affordance would include that it take our weight), but that in addition, it would need to occasion reflection on our human status in the natural world. Clearly, chairs are not typically the kind of thing we find sublime.

So here I use “ascription” to emphasise the way “affordances” are comprised by learning from experience including culturally specific learning, even if the content is typically constrained by universals. In the case of aesthetic concepts like the sublime, the ascriptions reflect the need for beings with life-questioning capacities to develop constructive narratives around conceptions of self, given the *prima facie* dispassionate and alienating face of nature. The need for this kind of elaboration has been recognised in various philosophical contexts.¹⁶ But none of these debates and discussions acknowledges that much of the theoretical work has already been done by the concept of *perceptual affordance*.¹⁷

Understanding reflective judgments in a contemporary theoretical context proves quite helpful in distinguishing between ungrounded belief and what Kant might have described as thinking “of something supersensible in a way which is serviceable to the experiential use of our reason” ([AK 8: 136-37] 1996: 10).¹⁸ My aim is to present the sublime as an experience the nature of which demonstrates a case where perceptual experience involves affordances which invite certain kinds of interactions including the identification of certain ends. In short, the condition for the sublime is having the ability to think, and the structures of mind and experience that this entails. The sublime involves finding the very perception of certain phenomena sufficient to prompt a sense of ourselves as more than the sum of our instincts, and this is both sobering and liberating.

III Intentional pleasure

The experience of the sublime is usually discussed in terms of natural objects or events which are a potential threat to us. They might be threatening by their monolithic size or by their potentially destructive power. On the face of it, such objects or events do not put us in

a pleasant state of mind. And yet, we seem to enjoy them for this very unpleasantness as long as we are actually out of immediate danger.

All philosophical accounts of the sublime include terms which reflect elements of pain and pleasure. Such accounts vary on whether these are successive components or combine in a sobering kind of pleasure. Most of the debates around the sublime begin by attempting to justify a position on this question. But the way pain and pleasure themselves are understood impacts upon how this question is answered. Consider that the feeling of the sublime seems to precede any thoughts we may have about it. Yet a certain enculturation into ideas of nature as “landscape” or nature as a metaphor for emotional states, condition experiences of the sublime. Experientially, the sublime engages us because of the objective stimulus it represents. It might just be a towering edifice or a stormy sky. To be sublime though it must engage us subjectively; for example, we feel the sublime object’s magnificence in its size or power.

Burke explained the initial feeling of the sublime rather reductively as fear, while Kant thought it was a feeling of being inadequate to the task of grasping the form of the object’s immense size or power.¹⁹ According to Kant, the structure of the experience prompts an analogy between physical size and power in nature on the one hand, and the immense scope and freedom of the human mind on the other. Most significantly for Kant, the sublime prompts an appreciation of the contrast between the agent-less forces of nature compared to our own agency. As Kant explains:

[I]n our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power (which is not part of nature) to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial, and hence to regard its power (to which we are, to be sure, subjected in regard to these

things) as not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment. ... To be sure, this principle seems far-fetched and subtle, hence excessive for an aesthetic judgment; but the observation of human beings shows the opposite, that it can be the principle for the most common judgments even though one is not always conscious of it. ([AK 5: §28, '262] 2000: 145).

After Kant, the sublime is formulated as a perceptual experience involving an inhibition of our powers or emotions, followed by their release, by which one experiences a relief-type pleasure. But their release requires some intellectual input which would seem to presuppose a facilitating kind of pleasure. As Kant puts it, the sublime involves an "[E]motion, a sensation in which agreeableness is produced only by means of a momentary inhibition followed by a stronger outpouring of the vital force" ([AK 5: §14, '226] 2000: 111). It might be worth mentioning here that while Kant does analyse the sublime in terms of universal principles, grounded by the moral law and the idea of freedom within us ([AK 5: §29, '275] 2000: 156), it is consistent with Kant's account to envisage the manifestation of such principles as quite varied across different cultures and sub-cultures, hence compatible with the normative relation between us and the way we represent objects.²⁰

Paul Guyer argues that Kant equivocates on the role of propositional content when discussing the dynamical sublime (an experience of power in nature rather than size, the latter the mathematical sublime according to Kant). Guyer thinks the text may suggest that a judgment or propositional attitude occurs in response to the inhibition, the ameliorating ideas of which give rise to the experience of release (1993: 213-14 [AK 5: §28, '260, '264]). Kant thought the feeling of being inadequate to the task of imaging the object, automatically gives way to a sense of our superiority over the determinism of nature and

this is felt as a release. It seems reasonable to propose, and Guyer thinks there is textual evidence to suggest, that Kant thought the sense of release was prompted by a certain narrative generated by the perceiver (Kant [AK 5: '257]).

Both Burke and Kant, along with other eighteenth century authors on the sublime, thought that the response to the sublime was universal, though in Kant's case, given certain conditions. This was explained by Burke in terms of survival instincts but in Kant's case by the structure of the mind. Kant postulated a mind structured in such a way that our rational selves could be seen to be freely oriented even if embedded in a larger system of physically determined laws. Nonetheless Kant thought that though everyone had the potential to experience the sublime, unlike beauty the sublime required enculturation. For Kant, only those capable of responding to reasons and meanings, in other words, a rational normativity, could experience the sublime and he associated this with enculturation: that is, growing into one's society and away from being determined by appetite and self-interest.²¹ Kant wrote:

[W]e cannot with the same readiness count on others to accept our judgment about the sublime in nature [as for the beautiful]. For it seems that, if we are to pass judgment on that superiority of [such] natural objects, not only must our aesthetic power of judgment be far more cultivated, but also ... [i]n order for the mind to be attuned to the feeling of the sublime, it must be receptive to ideas ([AK 5: '265] 1987: 124).

There is a difference between concepts and ideas in Kant's system of the mind; suffice to say here that the ideas he had in mind were of a particular kind. In the next paragraph he writes:

But the fact that a judgment about the sublime in nature requires culture ... still in no way implies that it was initially produced by culture and then introduced to society by way of (say) mere convention. Rather, it has its foundation in human nature: in something that, along with common sense, we may require and demand of everyone, namely, the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to moral feeling ([AK 5: '265] 1987: 125).²²

The issue of the ideas involved in the sublime is a knotty one. While commentators accept the role of ideas in the sublime, their discussions and analysis do not always make it entirely clear what role the ideas play, at what point they come into the experience, and of what they actually consist. There is general consensus that one does not need to contemplate any particular set of ideas in order to prompt an experience of the sublime. The perceptual object itself prompts the relevant experience through the mechanism of a *perceptual affordance* as explained in the previous section. But it does seem that the experience simply manifests as the kind of experience that *would be explained if* we were entertaining certain kinds of ideas. I will elaborate further in the next section.

For now consider that, in the context of the tenets of liberal naturalism, the sublime is of interest because the assumption of philosophical accounts of aesthetic concepts as construed by Kant, is that perceptual experience is itself theory laden or at least is in part constituted by affordances, and these affordances, where aesthetic experience is concerned, involve prescriptions to value and act in certain ways. These affordances are culturally based to varying degrees, even when they answer to desires which could be deemed universal in beings like us with reasoning powers. If it is true that everyone needs to feel their reasons for living reflected in nature and society, the narratives that serve this end might vary between cultures or traditions. But this narrative is the affordance that

characterises the sublime. As such the sublime demonstrates that to explain the pain and pleasure of the sublime requires the explanatory power of the first and second person perspectives available through a liberal naturalism. What is also clear, is that after Kant, the pleasure involved is not instinctual as Burke may have postulated, but instead a pleasure that is taken in the object in virtue of enculturation. Regarding the pleasure taken in beauty which also applies to the sublime, Kant writes:

only that of the taste for the beautiful is a disinterested and free satisfaction; ... [in contrast] [a]n object of inclination and one that is imposed upon us by a law of reason for the sake of desire leaves us no freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure ourselves ([AK 5: 210] Guyer 2000 p.95).

IV Non-perceptually represented perceptual properties

The explanation given for the tenor of the experience of the sublime is that we actually have certain ideas in front of mind that become so interwoven into the perceptual experience of the object that we feel that the object is expressive of these very same ideas. This is what is meant by “the ascription” of certain narratives to an object. There is a certain corroboration between philosophers, poets and artists regarding the kind of ideas involved. Even before Kant, an appreciation of landscape as sublime was understood to be an indication of an enlightened mental state and elevated moral disposition.²³ And by the time of the early nineteenth century, after Kant, the influential and much acclaimed British poet William Wordsworth thought that while poetry must necessarily be pleasurable, it was a pleasure we took in the way poetry heightened our interest in moral relations.²⁴

As discussed earlier, philosophers after Kant have postulated that the experience involves a sense of some kind of constraint (a sense of our frailty or physical limitations)

evoked by the size or might of an object. In response our way of representing the object swings to mitigating these feelings with ideas of some kind. The thing is though, our awareness is of the object not ideas peculiar to us. That is, the ideas summoned up to mitigate the negative aspect are experienced as if the sublime object is expressive of them. How is this possible? According to Bence Nanay:

A major question in philosophy of perception is about which properties are perceived and which ones are inferred or non-perceptually represented. Beliefs can represent their objects as having any property. In the case of perceptual states, in contrast, the set of properties they represent their objects as having is limited. The question is how limited this set of properties is. Colour is a good candidate for a perceived property, whereas being made in Australia is a good candidate for a non-perceptually represented one. But there are many kinds of properties in between that are more difficult to categorise (2018: 53).

The sublime could reasonably be considered as “in between”. Like colour, the subjective basis is sub-personal, but unlike colour, it seems to come with a more fleshed out narrative even if this narrative is brought to bear unconsciously, with the effects of the narrative felt, rather than read off, so to speak. However, it is the case that in certain cultures, the perception of a certain colour can afford certain values such as luck, spirituality, purity and so on. This is closer to the sublime than if we simply perceived colour as purely descriptive, a means to object recognition. But the structure of the sublime as theorized suggests a more palliative narrative. As such, rather than posited in terms of a property, perhaps it is more accurately conceived as a propositional attitude or value. Nanay continues with some examples of what he has in mind concerning the properties which fall in between perceptual and non-perceptually represented properties:

[I]t has been argued that we perceive objects ..., as being causally efficacious ..., or in terms of the way it functions for us so for example, edible, climbable or Q-able in general ..., or as having some kind of normative character or value ..., as having dispositional properties ..., and as having moral value (Nanay 2018: 53-4).

The notion that value is a component of our descriptions is given more and more attention across all areas of philosophy. Or put another way, attitudes saturate our perceptions. In this vein, Stephen White argues that “our capacity for action presupposes that affordances are a part of our perceptual experience” (2004: 218); and he argues this based on the inability to find the basis of motivation in objective, descriptive beliefs when understood as untainted by human interests. That is, if we did perceive things only in terms of objective properties isolated from any affordances or ascriptions which imbue the object with their purposes, meaning, significance and value for us, it is difficult to envisage how we motivate our actions at all.

Unless perception involves the ascription of meaning and significance to particular objects, the world would indeed seem an alienating place. But the sublime demonstrates the way narratives become embedded within our worldviews and shape our perceptions and experience. As we have seen, the structure of the sublime prompts the ascription of a certain narrative to the object in perceiving it; or at least our response to the sublime would be explained if this were the case.

While Kant refers at certain points in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* to the super-sensible substrate of humanity which he understands as the ground for human agency, it does not distort his analysis of aesthetic concepts such as the sublime by instead grounding this capacity in the higher cognitive powers of human beings. In fact, when he introduces the notion of the *Sensus Communis* in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment”, he

provides the means whereby the natural tendency to sociability in us leads to reflective judgment: a judgment that one compares with reason in general (what it is assumed others would judge) ([AK 5: '293] 2000, p.173). This kind of judgment draws us toward the kind of exchanges that foster the conditions required for calibration of values and meaning. A liberal naturalism is "on offer" in Kant's aesthetic theory as he treats aesthetic experience in terms of reflective judgments that exhibit intentionality and hence are normative rather than lawful by our contemporary theoretical framework.

In order to consider the explanatory power of the above account of the sublime, imagine you are visiting some extraordinary natural site such as the Grand Canyon in Arizona. Imagine yourself standing there, looking directly at it. You would be expected to have certain feelings in response to its sheer size and the various details of the terrain. This would be expected to hold your attention and keep you riveted to the spot. You would also be expected to have certain kinds of thoughts that could be understood to be tied to the feelings aroused by the object. What kind of thoughts and feelings would you consider apt given the view?

Imagine that you are quietly gazing out over the Grand Canyon and you explain your thoughts as taken up with an impending tennis match you have been anticipating. Most people would take this as a sign that you were distracted from the view even if you were looking in its direction. Or instead, imagine you merely described the shapes and colours, lines, form and texture, without any evaluative language. Many would regard this kind of response lacking in some respect, as if you were missing something. In contrast, if you explained your thoughts in terms of the grandiosity of the big themes of life and suggested the view simply made day-to-day concerns seem trivial, most people would understand you

as having been deeply moved by the view. It is what makes the latter content apt that is of interest to us here.

Conceiving of the sublime as a *perceptual affordance* provides a contemporary version of Kant's account. The experience is perceptual and entails ascribing meaning and significance to the object as though it were simply perceived in it. Kant wrote:

[t]hat which, without any rationalizing, merely in apprehension, excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposeful for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of the presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that. ([AK 5: '245] 2000: 129).

V Intersubjectivity

Above we saw that the structure of the sublime involves a negative and positive aspect, characterised broadly as having a sobering quality which is either enjoyed itself or at least prompts a more enjoyable response. In some accounts it is as though the sobering quality is converted into pleasure. This might seem to be Burke's idea that we feel fear but on realising our safety from any actual threat, we enjoy the stimulation of fear. But on closer scrutiny it would seem fear must be held in mind in order for this stimulus to be enjoyed even if it is accompanied with safety-securing narratives.²⁵

The positive aspect to the experience of the sublime relates to a unique feature of humanity which is being able to choose one's goals and intentions. This is both exhilarating and sobering, according to the Kantian sublime. How we explain this and even the content of our reflection is a matter of debate among commentators. However, that the sublime is

complex but pleasurable, and is the kind of experience we find deeply moving, is beyond dispute among those who write on the sublime.

Katerina Deligiorgi accepts the Kantian conception of the two aspect nature of the sublime where the positive response is primed by some sense of our physical limitations to which we respond by thinking of our own cognitive efficacy. She argues that “the mere thought that we have the capacity for agency” (2014: 32) evokes the pleasure of the sublime. Paul Crowther also adopting the Kantian view, argues that to ameliorate the negative aspect of the sublime experience, a sense of our freedom from nature’s determination is evoked, and this facilitates respect for persons, as we reflect upon this aspect of humanity: that human beings can “comprehend things which far exceed their sensible capacities” from the inside as it were (1989: 173). For Sandra Shapshay (2013) in a similar vein, the experience of the sublime focuses our attention upon the object and our relation to it and by analogy our relation to and position within the world. Deligiorgi, Shapshay, and Crowther, all have accounts which incorporate reflection as part of the sobering aspect which is furthered by the pleasure of heightened subjectivity. The sources of pain and pleasure in the sublime involve objective and subjective components, both instinctual and intellectual. However, the ameliorating ideas projected onto the object rely on cultural context for their content (ideas internalised from our interactions within our communities), and so are more accurately understood as inter-subjective.

Malcolm Budd (2002) furthers his own earlier account of the sublime (1998) which had been very influential in later twentieth century Anglo-American aesthetics. He sets aside the more architectonic aspects of Kant’s account and adopts the reductive approach of Burke’s account. However unlike Burke for whom the dangers of nature were the main objective feature, Budd sides with Kant in as much as he pinpoints the monolithic or

powerful in nature as the prompt, but deviates from both Burke and Kant in characterising the negative aspect as a feeling of insignificance in the face of nature's power and might. Rather than feel pleasure in being safe from the dangers of nature as Burke suggests, Budd argues that we feel a certain relief in the feeling of insignificance prompted by sublime objects in nature. So like Burke, no special gravitas just a relief-pleasure which is necessarily characterised by an absence – in this case not Burke's absence of threat or fear but the absence of responsibility or performance anxiety – and so the pleasure is somewhat laced through with a sense of our limitations which in this case is meant to be reassuring. It is as if we can snuggle into ourselves knowing that we cannot be expected to achieve the power and might of such extra-ordinary natural things. But this account does not do so well in accounting for the kind of reflection associated with the sublime. A relief-pleasure ends reflection rather than prompts it.²⁶ We could extend this objection to Burke's account also.

Ronald Hepburn (1996) who was considered something of a guru on natural aesthetics last century, treated the subjective component along Kantian lines involving a sense of our superiority over nature. But in a significant break from Kantian tradition, he treated this reflection as a kind of private reverie and as such the content of the reverie could well be idiosyncratic. It was typical during this period in Anglo-American aesthetics to treat aesthetic experience as bordering on a kind of sensuous gratification with the individual treated as an isolated primary unit. Aesthetic reflection was often treated as private reverie like day-dreaming and Hepburn's conception is a case in point. But if this were the case, we would not have responded with perplexity when the peruser of the Grand Canyon reflected upon an upcoming tennis match or focussed their full attention upon line, shape and texture. In contrast to Hepburn's view, the content of the sublime experience exhibits inter-subjective characteristics and so we do expect a certain kind of shared mental content to

accompany the experience. And Liberal Naturalism provides greater explanatory power to us in accounting for such observations.

It is of interest here to compare Budd and Hepburn's accounts with those of Delgiorgi, Crowther and Shapshay's. Budd and Hepburn's views are neatly contained by the kind of scientism it is argued in the first section of this chapter, characterised and limited philosophical aesthetics last century. In contrast Delgiorgi, Crowther and Shapshay put the tenor of the experience first and develop theories to account for it, rather than allow metaphysical dogma to limit what they recognise in the experience. In this they exercise a more liberal naturalism, and it must be said, achieve greater explanatory power by their accounts.

Nonetheless there is another question which separates the more liberal naturalist accounts. The question of the nature of the relevant mental content has led to debates around whether the experience is inwardly or outwardly focussed (Deligiordi 2014: 30). The problem is theorized in terms of how the subjective component could be objectively focussed. However, such problems arise from other background assumptions, in this case by omitting perceptual properties which are inferred or non-perceptually represented, as discussed by Nanay in the previous section above. If we think of the mechanism of the sublime as a perceptual affordance, then the way cultural attitudes and dispositions add content to and in turn shapes our experience is explained (Kant introduced the *Sensus Communis* to account for this as discussed in the previous section).²⁷ Reflection which is part of the defining aspect of the sublime does typically manifest in ways which are influenced by our personal predicament. But nonetheless, that the content of the reflection tends to exhibit existential themes relative to one's time in history and culture, is understood to be

universal by these writers on the sublime. A *perceptual affordance* is necessarily object centred but hooks our subjectivity into the object.

When considered as a *perceptual affordance*, the distinction between object-centredness and subjectivity becomes less sharp. The non-perceptual nature of the ideas we associate with the sublime are experienced as though they are expressed by the object, and orientate us in a certain life-reaffirming way. Kant avoided collapsing the perceptual experience into inward reverie even though he argued that the sublime was of the human mind rather than an objective property (AK 5: '245). The point of the sublime for Kant was that unless we hold certain assumptions about the world and society, we would not orientate ourselves in the appropriate way to want to know the world or cooperate with other people. For Kant this orientation is given a supersensible ground through the moral law within us, even though this law can be manifested through aesthetic reflective judgments prompted by certain natural objects. But moving away from Kant's metaphysics, we can see that certain orientations to the world must be assumed in order for us to function effectively. Through a liberal naturalism, we can explain how we orientate ourselves as we do by assuming that we acquire certain attitudes or what we would now call affordances through certain experiences. Aesthetic experiences like the sublime are bound to be had as they promote an elevated sense of humanity and the pleasure we take in this is assumed to be shared, and so the opportunity to have them will be facilitated in human culture. Scenic routes, look-outs and the cultivation of natural landscape destinations are relevant examples.

In sum, so far we have seen that the idea of the sublime is that feelings aroused in us by certain natural objects are feelings that orientate us to the world in ways conducive to our flourishing. Furthermore I have argued that questions regarding the structure of the

sublime – the relation of pain to pleasure, the role of ideas, and the relation of objectivity and subjectivity – can be answered if the sublime is understood as a *perceptual affordance*.

VI The Sublime and morality

As we have seen, while there is broad agreement among those who accept a Kantian theory of the sublime concerning the tenor and significance including that the pleasurable aspect involves some kind of ameliorating narrative generated by the perceiver, there is some variation concerning the details of this narrative. While most Kantian influenced accounts understand the content to orientate us toward but above nature in some respect, Shapshay (2013), Emily Brady (2013) and Christine Battersby (2007) argue in different ways that the sublime actually primes us to feel incorporated into nature. They treat this response as priming a moral obligation in us to respect nature, and for both Brady and Battersby this specifically includes respect for diversity in nature. However, at times one might be forgiven for concluding they had collapsed the sublime into the experience of beauty. Traditionally, beauty is about finding the world a perfect fit for the kind of beings that we are. The sublime in contrast, is thought to set us above the rest of nature as beings capable of taking responsibility for our actions. And in this way, the sublime is thought to orientate us to the world and each other as moral beings.

Francois Lyotard (2011 [1984]) adapts the Kantian notion of the sublime to explain the possibility of cultural renewal. He argues that the sublime can be understood as an experience of the as yet unsayable; “as yet” because Lyotard (after Adorno, and in turn arguably after Kant) assumes our concepts evolve in response to cultural renewal, and as such their evolution outruns our linguistic terms. The experience of the sublime captures just that aspect of our conceptual framework that is exhausted by new ways of construing

experience. Not being able to say what one means is frustrating, but at the same time it is liberating to find that we are not constrained by literal preordained assemblages of terms and expressions. The idea is that art is the vehicle for such expression. As such Lyotard removes any direct link between the sublime and morality, but it can be argued that he nonetheless maintains an indirect link.

Lyotard's account can be understood as Kantian in that for Kant, judgments of the sublime do not lay claim to "any cognition of the object" but like all reflective judgments they "nevertheless [are] still related to concepts" ([AK 5: '244] 2000: 128). For Kant, in the sublime "the mind is incited to abandon sensibility and to occupy itself with ideas that contain a higher purposiveness" ([AK 5: '246] 2000: 129). Kant distinguishes between "our cognition of natural objects" and "our concept of nature". The experience of the sublime expands the latter, not the former ([AK 5: '246] 2000: 130). This means that reflective judgments involve how we construe nature rather than how nature presents to us. In line with this, Lyotard identifies the sense in which the sublime expands our understanding. And he does this in a way which shows how human artefacts might exploit this capacity. Lyotard argued that the sublime grounded the possibility of avant-garde art which in his account (after Adorno) is a mechanism for cultural renewal. Cultural renewal demonstrates the exercise of agency and the way in which communities of people are the authors of their own destinies. In this sense the sublime is a sign of our capacity for morality.

The various Kantian conceptions including Lyotard's account, provide a link either directly or indirectly to morality. We have considered the way this link is thought to occur by various writers whether as respect for humanity, pleasure in our agency, enabling cultural renewal or respect for nature. Writers like Melissa Merritt (2012), and Robert Clewis (2009) conceive the sublime entirely in terms of alerting us to capacities within us that are

conditions for morality. Presumably Kant was interested in the sublime for this very reason. The conception of the sublime developed here as based within the contemporary terms of a more liberal naturalism, draws upon the idea of a *perceptual affordance* to explain the intersubjective nature of the sublime rather than Kant's reliance on the moral law within. We could also draw upon research which shows the way imagery to which we are previously exposed, can shape and influence what we subsequently perceive (what we notice, foreground, and the significance it holds for us) (Fazekas and Nanay 2017) as a way of demonstrating the way affordances work. The structure of the sublime experience as outlined above, the particular way pain and pleasure are evoked and combined, and the inclination to narrative that characterises the human mind (Currie 1995), in addition to the influence of imagery on perception, all support a conception of the sublime as indicative of our agency and hence our moral capacity. In contrast, it is clear that scientific accounts, such as include a reduction to visual elements, a limitation to representational perceptual properties, and instinctual responses or private reverie in place of ideas, cannot do justice to the experience of the sublime including a sense of our morality.

VII Conclusion

It is clear that the experience of the sublime is an aesthetic experience which occasions and promotes ideas which further our efficacy in the world as individuals and communities. The writers on the sublime who prioritize their experiences and observations over metaphysical dogma such as narrow scientific naturalism, find that those aspects of us which are a condition of our moral capacity are raised to consciousness in experiences of the sublime. We intervene in instinctual responses to certain visual stimuli to find some equilibrium within our understanding. That this is a universal response is suggested by the cross-cultural

capacity for awe and wonder in the face of some phenomena that without our intellectual intervention would be de-motivating for our human endeavours and schemes. But it also shows how we can exercise agency in how we orientate ourselves to the world and each other which speaks to our moral capacity.

We have seen that the structure of the sublime as identified and described by Kant is taken as a starting point. As Kant puts it, the sublime involves an “agreeableness ... produced only by means of a momentary inhibition followed by a stronger outpouring of the vital force” ([AK 5: § 14, ‘226] 2000: 111). However, as we have seen there are a range of positions taken by commentators on the sublime regarding the relation of pain and pleasure, the role of ideas and their relevance to moral conceptions of self. Many disagreements over the relation between pain and pleasure follow from the account of pleasure, imagination, and perception that the commentator implicitly holds. When such processes or faculties are envisaged within the scientific image, much is omitted, and the result is a notion of the sublime which seems little more than a feeling of relief from danger or perhaps a stimulus to day-dreaming. In contrast, our own observations, other writing on the sublime, in addition to expressions of the sublime in certain artistic and literary works, would suggest otherwise.

In this chapter I show how treating the sublime as a *perceptual affordance* explains the link between pain and pleasure, and the inter-subjective and objective focus engaged by the sublime. My approach demonstrates the greater explanatory power in reconstructing reflective judgment in terms of perceptual affordance which in turn explains the concepts of intentional pleasure, intersubjectivity and moral awareness for a fuller and more experientially complete account of the sublime.

Kant's conception of the sublime is quite compatible with the possibility that the narrative or ideas through which we experience the sublime might change and vary from age to age and between cultures. In many respects the theoretical commitments of the Kantian sublime nicely foreshadow certain tenets of liberal naturalism. The tenor of these ideas and the structure posited to explain the experience of the sublime are devised to show how a perceptual experience, which while subjective, can make a claim of normative validity and hence a claim on everyone's assent. Construed in this way avoids many of the distortions which arise by understanding reflective judgment, pleasure, perception, intersubjectivity and morality in a non liberal-naturalist and overly atomistic manner. Kant thought that the sublime was not so much a symbol of morality like beauty ([AK 5: '353] 2000, p.227) but that the sublime raises ideas within us like the idea of freedom which is conducive to morality.²⁸ We can reject his understanding of the lawful quality of morality and give instead a greater role to the pressures of inter-subjectivity which arguably shape perceptual affordances. In this chapter, the explanatory power of liberal naturalism for the sublime is revealed through the concept of *perceptual affordance*.

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¹ For a detailed account of the contrast between liberal naturalism and scientific naturalism see Macarthur (2019, p.572).

² For a detailed account of the aims and objectives of Liberal Naturalism, see: De Caro and Macarthur (2004, 2010).

³ Crespo (2019, p.256).

⁴ McDowell (2004, p.95).

⁵ Macarthur (2019, p.573).

⁶ Fink (2006, p.203).

⁷ Putnam (2002, p.15).

⁸ See McMahon (2017) for a detailed account of the textual evidence behind a reading of Kant's aesthetic theory according to which it entails cognitive engagement. Also see McMahon (2020) in the section called "The Modern Origins of Beauty Theory".

⁹ Kant ([CJ AK: 5: 305, §44] 2000: 184-85. For a discussion of this, see McMahon (2020) in the section entitled "The Modern Origins of Beauty Theory". When certain terms used by Kant in his "Analytic of the Beautiful" are put into the context of the metaphysical commitments and conceptual framework of his time, and understood in light of what he writes in the "Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments", an interpretation of his aesthetic theory becomes clearer and arguably more accurately reflects Kant's philosophical objectives.

¹⁰ See McDowell (1998; and 2004).

¹¹ It is not only Kant for whom such a defence is possible. See Giladi (2014) who interprets Hegel's idealism in terms of liberal naturalism; and Zuckert (2015) who reconciles culturalism and naturalism in Herder's aesthetics.

¹² Macarthur (2019, p.577).

¹³ Macarthur (2019, p.578).

¹⁴ In 1979 Paul Guyer wrote that the sublime "will not be of much interest to modern sensibilities" (1979, 400, fn 2). In 1993 he revised this, writing in response to the feedback he had received to his 1979 book that: "[n]o statement in that book has come in for more criticism than this remark" (1993, p.187). And see an example of renewed interest in the sublime, in Arcangeli and Dokic (2021) who present another contemporary reading of the Kantian structure of the sublime.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the various influences on Kant's conception of the sublime, see Guyer (2014).

¹⁶ See Nichols and Stich (2000) for their concept of the "script elaborator" which they use to explain the interface between imaginings and perception. But see Langland-Hassan (2016) who argues that their reliance on the "script elaborator" simply boxes the hard problem of imagination (which is the way he categorises the problem of ascription) and gives it a name, rather than solving the problem. In contrast, I argue that the concept of *perceptual affordance* addresses the problem of ascription without proposing expensive mental hardware.

¹⁷ More work on making this link could be done by drawing upon Fazekas and Nanay (2017) which provides an account showing how imagery (as top down) is the mechanism by which the cognitive penetration of perception is mediated. Fazekas and Nanay's research, though focussed on a different problem, further

corroborates the active role the experience of the sublime can play in shaping behaviour. See also Nanay (2010).

¹⁸ This issue is also relevant to Kant's distinction between private and public reason. This is discussed in Kant ([AK 5: §40, '293-296] 2000: 173-76). See also O'Neill (2011) where she argues that the *Sensus Communis* as represented in the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment is Kant's best demonstration of public reason.

¹⁹ Kant discusses the difference between his own account and that of Burke's in ([AK 5: 277-278] 2000, pp.158-59).

²⁰ Kant himself expresses this acknowledgment of the cultural variations in the manifestation of such rules and principles more generally, for example, in his study of culturally based norms in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic point of View*.

²¹ For a discussion of Kant's notion of "freedom to think" see the discussion in McMahon (2014a: 109-110). For the essay in which Kant discusses "freedom to think" see "What Does It Mean To Orient Oneself in Thinking" ([AK 8: 144] 1996: 16). Also for the difference between private and public reason see O'Neill 2011.

²² I quote from Pluhar's translation for these extracts on the sublime for ease of understanding. However, the translation closer to the original, even though some revision occurs there also to assist understanding, can be found in Guyer and Matthews 2000: 148-149.

²³ Hirschfeld ([1779-85] trans. Parshall 2001). For a discussion, see McMahon (2014a, p.136-39).

²⁴ Wordsworth and Coleridge ([1800, 1802] 1963: pp. 250-51, fn.50.)

²⁵ Deligiorgi argues that the experience of the sublime orientates us to the objective world in certain ways and this involves our attention be directed to the object rather than lost in personal reverie (2014: 30). She argues that this suggests that pain is not converted to pleasure but remains as part of the experience in some sense.

²⁶ For an account of the difference between relief-pleasure and facilitating-pleasure which would suggest that the pleasure of the sublime is the latter, see Mohan Matthen (2018, 2017).

²⁷ A discussion of how exchanges between varying perspectives provide occasions for a calibration of terms within a community can be found in McMahon (2014b).

²⁸ I would like to thank Talia Morag for inviting me to present at the Liberal Naturalism conference in Melbourne in November 2017; and for the feedback she and the other members of the audience provided at that time. I have written on naturalising Kant's conception of beauty (2007) and the role of the imagination in the sublime (2014a ch.6) but Morag's conference prompted me to articulate more explicitly the metaphysical commitments of my position. I am also grateful for the invitation from Mario De Caro and David Macarthur to contribute a chapter to this anthology. And to the support provided by the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant DP150103143.