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### **Commentary on Jane Forsey’s Critique of the Sublime**

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#### **1 Introduction**

The sublime is an aspect of experience that has attracted a great deal of scholarship, not only for scholarly reasons but because it connotes aspects of experience not exhausted by what Descartes once called clear distinct perception. That is, the sublime is an experience of the world which involves us in orientating ourselves within it, and this orientation, our human orientation, elevates us in comparison to the non-human world according to traditional accounts of the sublime. The sublime tells us something about our relation to the world rather than anything about the world per se. Nonetheless there is an objective sense of the sublime in that the narratives involved are culturally endorsed rather than invented by an individual. This means that objects can be judged worthy or not of evoking experiences of the sublime. In other words, it is not an idiosyncratic matter.

Immanuel Kant’s formulation of this involved explaining how such an experience is possible in terms of his system of the mind. Jane Forsey notes that Kant takes the features of the sublime as given and extrapolates from them certain features of the mind as if any

concept of the sublime must implicate the mental architecture of his account (2007). Further to this she argues that in fact the concept of the sublime does implicate a particular system of the mind but neither Kant nor anyone else can successfully formulate it because the concept itself frames certain contradictions. According to Forsey, two consequences follow. First she argues that Kant's system of the mind does not support the features of the sublime; and secondly that no system could as the very concept is incoherent.

If Forsey can show that Kant was mistaken in presenting his account as coherent given his commitments, this would be of interest in its own right. However, her stronger claim is that we cannot separate any concept of the sublime out from Kant's theoretical underpinnings. That the way the features of the mind are meant to operate in experiences of the sublime are contradictory simply points to the fatal flaws in the whole concept. Her conclusion is that there is no coherent account of the sublime available to us.

I will argue that Forsey bases her reasoning on the assumption that a foundational empiricist or direct perception holds; and she interprets Kant's notions of imagination, understanding and reason as though they are grounded in just such an account of perception. This is revealed in her interpretation of Kant's phrase "beyond cognition". Once this foundationalism is replaced with an account of perception more aligned with current research on perception, both philosophical and empirical, then an account of the sublime is available. Further to this however, I argue that what constitutes the narrative of the sublime is historically contingent. Before setting out my arguments, I consider Forsey's argument in more detail.

## **2 Forsey on the Sublime**

Forsey begins by presenting Guy Sircello's account of the sublime as involving an experience which goes beyond human powers of knowledge and as such is "inaccessible to human thought" (Sircello 1993, discussed in Forsey: 381). Forsey tells us that Sircello in researching theories of the sublime found that the general idea was that our cognitive powers have limited access to reality and that certain experiences which we call sublime involve going beyond the limitations of our cognitive capacity. Forsey lists a number of 18<sup>th</sup> century British philosophers as holding this view, such as Joseph Addison, the Earl of Shaftsbury, and Edmund Burke in addition to the twentieth century French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard ([1984] 2011, discussed in Forsey: 381-382).

Sircello argues that the traditional way of understanding our capacity for the sublime is incoherent. I represent Sircello's version of the argument in the form of a dilemma as follows. An experience of the sublime involves going beyond our cognitive powers and entails acknowledging something in the world. If an experience of the sublime goes beyond cognition, then cognition is not engaged. If it entails acknowledging something in the world then cognition is engaged. Cognition cannot be both not engaged and engaged at the same time. Hence the traditional view of the sublime is incoherent. Forsey refers to the account of the sublime targeted here as the first formulation of the sublime which she associates with Kant.

Sircello wants to salvage an account of the sublime. To this end he points out that people do in fact describe the objects of their sublime experiences (in Forsey: 383). He argues that *prima facie* it would seem that we must drop the idea that experience of the sublime involves going beyond our cognitive capacity or alternatively we must drop the fact that we are able to identify the objects of the sublime. However, he identifies a third alternative, revealing that the dilemma as I state it is indeed a false one. His alternative suggests that the first premise of the apparent dilemma could be revised by explaining that the experience

provides us with a sense of our cognitive limitations rather than actually giving us access to some aspect of reality beyond our cognitive capacities. This is what Forsey refers to as the second formulation of the sublime.

Forsey assesses Sircello's revised account of the sublime, the second formulation as she refers to it, by considering whether Sircello's revision salvages Kant's account. She finds that Sircello's account inherits certain fatal flaws from Kant notwithstanding his adaptation. She points out that Kant emphasized that "nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime" (Ak 5: 250, 1987) but Kant had already written that "what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason" (Ak 5: 245, 1987). I must interject at this point that what Kant writes at '245 clearly indicates that what he writes at '250 does not mean an object of the senses cannot be experienced as sublime but only that it cannot be considered sublime based only on the fact of it being an object of the senses, as I am sure Forsey would acknowledge. But Forsey argues that Kant is suggesting we access some Platonic realm through experiences of the sublime. I would respond that, on the contrary, for Kant the experience of the sublime is due in part to the way we construe the object or in Kant's words, "all we are entitled to say is that the object is suitable for exhibiting a sublimity that can be found in the mind" (Ak 5: 245, 1987). To my mind, this would seem to dissolve the tension that according to Sircello exists between the epistemological (beyond knowing) and ontological (that the object exists) issues within Kant's account rather than support Forsey's interpretation of Kant.

While Kant did not hold that the sublime refers to information about an object, he explained that the sublime was expressive of what the object means for us. It is in this respect that the experience goes *beyond* cognition. That is, he did not mean that experiences of the sublime operate without cognition. The relevant point he wants to make is that the experience of the sublime is constituted in large part by the ascription of meaning and

significance to the object and that this meaning is drawn from rational ideas. In this way he shows how our orientation to the world can be infused with the ideas of reason and hence generated by us. Forsey's critique seems to be based on the false dilemma that either experience is given/caused by perception or alternatively its objects exist in some Platonic realm. In contrast, Kant's view is that the meaning we ascribe to experience is sourced in us; and furthermore, that the meaning we ascribe to experience shapes that experience.

Forsey argues that for Kant the sublime refers to the state of mind in which we realise the superiority of reason over the world as presented by the senses, in support of which she quotes "Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense" (Ak 5: 250, 1987; Forsey: 384). What is truly sublime for Kant, according to Forsey, and surely she is right in this, is not an object of sense but an object of thought – the superiority of our moral selves over the forces of nature. This idea is sublime. Certain objects might provide the catalyst to experiences of the sublimity of this idea but the objects themselves are not sublime. Our capacity for reason might also be considered sublime. Well and good, but Forsey finds this account incoherent because Kant explains reason as based within a supersensible realm to which the sublime gives us access as if there is some part of reality to which we have no cognitive access. Forsey argues that this is repeated in Sircello's second formulation of the sublime, according to which the experience alerts us to the limitations of our cognitive powers.

This interpretation of Kant can be shown to be rather disingenuous. "Going beyond cognition" given Kant's notions of aesthetic and rational ideas, clearly does not mean gaining access to some Platonic realm as Forsey would have it. We cognize objects in a determinate and functional way as if they were simply given (as if, perception and cognition of objects exercised only bottom-up processing only). This constitutes theoretical knowledge of objects. However, our moral engagement in the world operates top down. "Going beyond

cognition” means attributing more to the object than is given. With aesthetic judgment of beauty we go beyond cognition and we experience much that is stored in association with the concept of the object that is normally left out of that concept; the fragments, associations, nuances, intimations that are not exhausted by the literal concept we have of an object. In experiences of the sublime the rational ideas play this role which are associated with a broader cultural basis (ideas with no intuition, as rational ideas are, are associated with our moral feeling). As such, Sircello’s formulation does not address a flaw in Kant’s account but rather revises the moral dimension of it; and Forsey’s targeting of Kant is off the mark.

Forsey characterises Kant’s notion of cognitive success as the imagination’s synthesis of “sensory experience for the purposes of determinant judgment” (385). This process is constituted by imagination being in harmony with the understanding. However, Forsey characterises the Kantian sublime as a matter of cognitive failure which entails that we cannot match understanding with imagination; and this is then linked by Kant to our moral transcendence according to Forsey (386). As such we can only feel ourselves morally superior but not know it. Because of the significance of our capacity for experiences of the sublime for our moral selves, Forsey thinks this makes the sublime “no longer a truly aesthetic concept” for Kant (385).

Forsey turns back to Sircello’s revised theory of the sublime (the second formulation) according to which the experience of the sublime provides us with a sense of our cognitive limitations rather than actually giving us access to some aspect of reality beyond our cognitive capacities (the latter as we have seen is Forsey’s interpretation of Kant which I have argued is mistaken in my view). As if to corroborate this (mis)interpretation of Kant, Forsey presents an outline of Malcolm Budd’s account of the sublime. But Budd disagrees with Kant on a different point than Forsey but perhaps agrees with Sircello given what I have pointed out is the upshot of Sircello’s view. Budd agrees with Kant (and Sircello) that

pleasure results from cognitive dissonance of some kind but argues (against Kant) that no morally relevant conclusions can be drawn from this (1998, 246; in Forsey: 386). According to Budd, we simply feel that our insignificance in the face of overpowering natural forces or monolithic forms of nature is somehow pleasurable.

In discussing Sircello and Budd, Forsey slides into referring to their ideas on the limitations of cognition and cognitive dissonance respectively as cognitive failure. To this point in the argument Forsey believes she has revealed that sublimity cannot reside in objects of experience when they are natural objects because the whole feeling of the sublime is about cognitive failure and we cannot know the objects of experience apart from cognition of them. In addition, sublimity cannot reside in objects of experience if they are non-natural either and while Forsey does not provide the reasons for this, presumably the reasons for omitting natural objects apply to non-natural objects (386). Compounding all this, Forsey argues that when the feeling of cognitive failure is no longer given moral significance, there are no grounds for the pleasure in the sublime and instead we are left with an experience both frustrating and distressing. That is, for a concept of the sublime to be coherent, we need to explain why in cases of the sublime, cognitive failure either suggested or actual, evokes pleasure. When, following Budd, we reject the moral significance of the sublime, Forsey concludes that all kinds of cognitive failure ought to arouse an experience of the sublime which of course they do not, and hence the whole notion of the sublime is called into question.

However, my rejection of this way of setting up the concept of the sublime is manifold. In addition to my particular challenge to the way she has interpreted key aspects of Kant's text, it is arguable that Forsey has assembled caricatures of Sircello, Budd and Kant on the sublime. None of these authors explained the sublime as a matter of cognitive failure *simpliciter*. Going beyond cognition is the way Kant describes the process but this is not

cognitive failure; instead “going beyond cognition” is conditioned on a cognitive capacity. It describes the path to the emergence of new awareness, new concepts. In his first Critique, Kant explains cognition as involving empirically necessary objects of knowledge. Going beyond cognition means that after object recognition one finds a meaning not presently exhausted by current conceptual frameworks. For Budd the sublime involves cognising our vulnerabilities and insignificance; and for Sircello it involves appreciating our cognitive limitations. None of these examples suggest cognitive failure. Forsey also thinks that the pleasure in these accounts is unmotivated; and she adds to these the account of Lyotard arguing that his account of the sublime fails for the same reason. But each of these authors attempt in their particular way to hook our intuitions into the idea that pleasure is felt in having the entrenched and established concepts of cognition affronted by sublime encounters. Whether it be the imaginative possibilities suggested by power or monolithic size, or the idea of something greater than ourselves of which we feel part, they present likely candidates of pleasure. It might simply be the idea that we can escape our puny myopic concerns for a moment of grand release. Forsey, in referring to the mechanism as cognitive failure, and failing to consider the various intellectual bases the various authors suggest could ground this pleasure, sets her targets up as straw men.

Forsey argues that the Kantian sublime requires that either the sublime is a property of the object or the experience of the sublime is an experience of cognitive failure; and she rejects both alternatives for the reasons given. But arguably so do the other accounts that she canvases. Forsey claims that Sircello excludes the experiential object altogether from his account but this is not correct either. Sircello revises the first formulation in what it means to go beyond cognition. In the first formulation it was said to mean going beyond the human powers of knowledge and accessing what is normally inaccessible to human thought. His new interpretation (the second formulation) as we saw above was that the sublime simply



revealed to us our cognitive limitations. Sircello did not reject the thesis that we know what prompts this experience, which is to say, he included the experienced object in his account. To interpret his second formulation in terms of a mental state devoid of an object is to distort his meaning. Forsey claims that in the accounts canvassed there is no mention of the sublime being shared or communicable, but in Kant's account the fact that the experience involves an experience of rational ideas is to point to the objectivity of the experience; the fact that it is in the public not private realm. Objects can be judged apt to evoke experiences of the sublime or not. Reasons can be given for this judgment. Characteristics of an object can be pointed out as relevant or not. If Forsey's way of characterising traditional theorising about the sublime was accurate, the concept would indeed be incoherent. But this is not the case.

When Forsey analyses the accounts regarding the feelings involved in the sublime, matters do not improve. She criticises Budd for providing an inconclusive account of the sublime in not acknowledging that the feeling aroused by the sublime is intentional. If he did this, she argues, he would have to explain why feelings of awe and incomprehension were involved rather than other feelings. She criticises Sircello for adopting a notion of feeling which is explicitly non-intentional. Sircello, in his methodology, employs poetic language in an attempt to demonstrate or exemplify the experience of the sublime rather than explain it, and on this basis Forsey argues that Sircello rejected analyses of the sublime as not possible. Forsey concludes that no philosophical account of the sublime is available. The options she sees herself as having canvassed either (i) include contradictory premises (first formulation); or (ii) give us experiential access to something beyond the phenomenal which is at worst implausible and at best unconstrained (second formulation); and in some cases (iii) inadvertently restrict the sublime to the private, idiosyncratic and whimsical while also removing any basis for pleasure (by omitting moral significance).

The problem with Forsey's overall thought about the structure of the sublime is she assumes a foundationalist account of perception as expressed by the false dilemma: objects of perception and cognition are either given (bottom-up) or they exist in a Platonic realm. In what follows, I will trace certain ideas found in the writing of a selection of philosophers concerned with how culturally endorsed objects acquire their meaning and significance. They do not all mention the sublime explicitly but what they all address is the content of cognition which goes beyond what is given in perception.

### **3. Updating the sublime: a unity of nature or a patchwork of cultural differences**

Emily Brady rewrites the Kantian sublime (2013). She claims her account tracks the implications for the narrative involved in the experience of the sublime of Kant's aesthetic and moral theory better than Kant did himself but I am not going to evaluate Brady's account on these terms. Instead, I want to consider her view in terms of a plausible contemporary experience of the sublime: plausible both in terms of practice and theoretical commitments. Instead of the sublime involving a sense of awe or terror in the face of nature followed by a pleasurable feeling of our superiority over nature, she argues that it is not a feeling of superiority which we feel, but a sense of our integration into nature. This she suggests is the basis of the pleasure of the sublime experience.

Brady positions her view against much Anglo-analytical aesthetics such as Budd's account of the sublime in that she does not sharply separate the aesthetic from the ethical. Nonetheless she does follow Budd's naturalisation of the Kantian sublime. Budd explains our initial response to immense magnitudes of size or power as a feeling of our own insignificance which while initially shocking, is experienced as pleasurable (1998). One can imagine that primed by awe and then shock, the lack of our own hand in what we experience

reduces stress and tension, and is ultimately pleasing. However, Brady further updates the narrative for this feeling. Yet she does not understand her narrative as historically contingent. Had she done so her account would have been in line with the post-modernists from whom she is at pains to explicitly distinguish herself. Unlike Lyotard, for example, Brady treats the sublime in art as secondary (2013, Ch.5). But this is not the only way she sees her account as distinguished from Lyotard's post-modernism ([1984] 2011).

Brady not only naturalises the sublime by grounding her notion of the sublime on some natural fact about us, she goes further by factoring this natural fact into the experiential object of the sublime. While it is obviously true that everything of which we are capable must have some fact about the human creature at its base, Brady makes this the experienced content of the sublime. Like Kant, Brady understands the experience of the sublime as orientating us in the world. Yet, for Brady, the way we feel in nature is somehow natural, culturally unmediated. She treats the sublime as an aesthetic category and ethical in that it grounds a particular responsible attitude to the natural environment. Brady does not think that how we fill out the narrative of the sublime is historically contingent. She sees herself as advancing and improving the way we understand the implications of the structural aspects of Kant's sublime.

Brady treats the sublime, correctly in my view, as primarily an experience involved in orientating oneself to the world in a way that makes one feel at home in it. The assumption is that an attitude, perspective or outlook is required in order to want to know the world. The awe and wonder of the sublime arouses a sense of something greater than ourselves but fear turns to pleasure in our sense of feeling part of this greater thing, which in Brady's account is nature.

Of course for Kant the point was the way this opened up a gulf between what could count as power in nature and what could count as power within us. In nature it was dumb

force; in us autonomous reason. And this is the aspect of the sublime downplayed in the accounts discussed by Forsey; and in Brady's update. In contrast, if we treated the sublime as an experience of the world which orientates us in a way which works against feelings of alienation, then we have a much broader structure to deal with. In Kant's broadest characterisation of such an experience when he was discussing the enthusiasm of religion, he referred to a subjective principle serving an objective one (Kant AK 8:137). If we consider the sublime in this light, we could acknowledge that the kind of experience which might have that effect would suggest different explanations and prompt different narratives relative to cultural and historical contexts, both in experience and theoretically. For example, whether one understands oneself as partaking in the supersensible or feeling integrated into nature, would depend on whether one shares cultural commitments with Kant or Brady respectively. It is the contingent nature of the narrative of the sublime that is in evidence when we compare the account of Brady with another contemporary accounts such as that of Christine Battersby.

Christine Battersby has written extensively on the way our concepts are culturally contingent including the sublime. She argues that while the way Kant characterised the sublime might have been apt for his time, it is out of date now. Battersby thinks that the sublime as construed by Kant, is a structure we impose on experience as a way of domesticating what would otherwise terrorise us. This is why, according to Battersby, Kant explains the sublime in terms of the superiority of reason over the imagination because imagination cannot grasp what reason can impose order upon. So far this is a fairly standard interpretation. But Battersby argues further that finding pleasure in domesticating the other is dated and is no longer a normatively valid or effective response to world events. She writes that Kant's sublime takes as a "norm a particular kind of Westernised (and gendered) psyche that fears the "other" and the infinite power of nature." (2007: 193). Battersby argues that for a contemporary western mind, this narrative gains little traction. Instead, diversity, the other,

minorities, etc are part of how we construe ourselves and as such, today the sublime, the capacity to find the world a place in which we want to be, in spite of the worst evidence to the contrary, utilizes very different structures. Worryingly, this may be a resistance to the actual Battersby muses, but the sublime, according to Battersby, has always contained an element of this.

If we recognize the sublime as that aspect of experience that prompts a narrative about our place in the world, then we can see how it would manifest differently at different times, in different cultures. This is because the sublime is not merely given. It may be prompted by the encounter between reason and nature. But the meaning given to this encounter will be based on cultural beliefs and commitments which vary over time (see Putnam's sense of meaning, 1990). This is the sense in which the sublime goes beyond cognition. It is not non-cognitive but the significance of the object goes beyond what is given in perception.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I would like to thank Jane Forsey for raising the issue of the sublime in the way that she has. For me her critique set up the issue in terms of the perceptual object as opposed to the meaning and significance we ascribe to it. I have argued that the experience of the sublime involves the latter, and that the content of the narrative of the sublime is culturally contingent. Hence, it is in this sense that the perceptual object, considered on this perceptual basis alone, cannot be the basis of an experience of the sublime. This is because the experience of the sublime goes beyond mere cognition in the meaning and significance we ascribe to it.

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