

# Kantian Sublimity and Supersensible Comfort: A Case for the Mathematical Sublime

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## Abstract

Kant's work on the sublimity of aesthetic experience lends itself to puzzlement, if not misclassification. Complicating matters, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of sublimity: respectively, the "mathematical" and "dynamical" sublime. More mystifying is that the sublime is ineffable, beyond the ken of human comprehension. These perplexities notwithstanding, Kant argues that sublime sentiment produces a feeling of supersensible comfort. Commentators identify this comfort emanating most strongly from the dynamical sublime. However, in this paper I draw from the unity of reason thesis to offer a plausible account of how the mathematical sublime is equally capable of providing the same feeling of supersensible comfort.

*Keywords:* Kant, Sublime, Morality, Feeling, Ideas

## I

Immanuel Kant's work on the sublimity of aesthetic experience in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*<sup>1</sup> very easily lends itself to puzzlement, if not misclassification. For example, Jean-François Lyotard writes that Kant refers to sublime sentiment as an equivocal emotion.<sup>2</sup> However, 'equivocal,' or any of its cognates and synonyms, is not used by Kant in *The Analytic of the Sublime* to describe the nature of sublime feeling. Indeed, 'equivocal' implies an ambiguity that needs to be resolved in the sense of a term that is open to more than one interpretation, in which a term can signify for different things.

Instead of viewing the sublime as equivocal, the conflicting nature of sublime feeling is characterized by, e.g., its being *simultaneously* repulsive and attractive, sorrowful and joyful, and painful and pleasurable. Consequently, in our understanding of Kant's sublime, equivocation is defeated by recognizing the *relation* between seeming opposites, rather than by focusing on the polarities themselves and choosing the correct connotation. Instead, sublime feelings show the form of a necessary conjunction (e.g., *both* threatening and soothing), rather than an equivocation which calls on us to choose between a disjunction, e.g., repulsive *or* attractive, painful *or* pleasurable.

Whereas equivocation would force a choice between disjuncts, e.g., overpowering *or* empowering, if we view the sublime as being characterized by the simultaneity of its conjuncts, i.e., their being in constant opposition (e.g., repulsive *and* attractive), the true character of sublimity is revealed to the human subject. While the subject finds her experience of the sublime constituted by moments of a first conjunct, say, pain, she ultimately finds herself awash in feelings of the second conjunct, e.g., pleasure. The

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*Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* Vol. 43, No. 2, Summer 2020 [22-32]

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*contradictory* structure of the Kantian sublime is not one of sheer incongruity that begs for some form of choice between equivocating disjunctions or which looks forward to a dialectical resolution; for the two sides of the sublime experience are not sublated (*Aufgehoben*) and raised to a higher level.

Readings of the Kantian sublime that take it as exhibiting equivocation or a dialectical relation can perhaps be attributed to Kant's writing that sublimity is "a pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure" (KdU 5:260), or as described by Lyotard, "in [the sublime] pleasure derives from pain" (Lyotard, p. 77). The pleasure accompanying the sublime is what Kant calls a "negative pleasure" insofar as "the mind is not just attracted by the object but is alternately always repelled as well, the liking for the sublime contains not so much a positive pleasure as rather admiration and respect" (KdU 5:245).

Kant argues that even though sublimity is ultimately pleasurable, pain or agitation is a *conditio sine qua non* of sublime feeling. The sublime, then, is neither equivocal nor in a dialectical relation which moves toward a sublated third term, but is rather in the relation of *isotension*, wherein, for example, the antagonistic constituents of pain and pleasure are in a condition of constant combination. This antagonism, however, is appreciated by different capacities (sensation and reason), and hence do not cancel each other out. Indeed, the only conceivable "sublation" I can imagine associated with the Kantian sublime is that of the subject herself, who, although feeling overwhelmed, is moved toward a fulfilling experience, namely, as I will argue, to an even stronger feeling of comfort.

Kant accounts for what I have called the *isotensive* structure of the sublime by arguing that while the sublime object is repulsive to the perceptual part of the mind (in sensation), it is attractive to the contemplative side of the mind (in reason). Both sides are therefore necessary constituents of sublimity, and both sides are kept in constant tension, but because reason is for Kant superior to sensibility, the sublime is therefore experienced as pleasurable overall.

In other words, the sublime does not bifurcate the mind; rather, the conflict it causes between reason and sensibility is ultimately harmonious "for the whole vocation of the mind" (KdU 5:259). This suggests that sublimity designates and refers to a state of mind, rather than to the objects that cause it. "[T]rue sublimity," Kant writes, "must be sought only in the mind of the judging person and not in the natural object, the judging of which prompts this mental attunement" (KdU 5:256). Rather than being a characteristic of objects in the world, the sublime is a state of mind (KdU 5:256), namely, a form of aesthetic pleasure.

Because what constitutes the sublime is not an external object, "but the attunement that the intellect [gets]" (KdU 5:250 & 5:264), it is an example of minded-ness. The 'minded' nature of the sublime is the subject's *supersensible* experience of pleasure that results from her perceiving extremely large and powerful natural objects. In contradistinction to the beautiful, pleasure in the sublime relates to quantity rather than quality (KdU 5:244). And just as Kant made distinctions between two kinds of beauty (free and adherent, see §16, KdU 5:229), he distinguishes between two kinds of sublimity: the sublimity of infinite size, and the sublimity of infinite power.

## II

The sublimity of infinite size Kant calls "the mathematical sublime"; the sublimity of power, "the dynamical sublime". Kant explains that this distinction is grounded in a

more fundamental difference between the two functions of reason: theoretical reason, or what Kant calls ‘the cognitive power,’ and practical reason, which Kant refers to as “the power of desire” (KdU 5:247). However, the Kantian sublime does not belong only to reason, in which case it would not be an aesthetic, but a cognitive experience.

Kant writes that the mathematical sublime is excited by the relationship between the imagination and theoretical reason, while the dynamical sublime results from the relationship between (sensible) desire and practical reason (KdU 5:256). Scholars have expressed concern about these groupings; specifically, that our understanding of their relationship needs to be “properly understood” because Kant’s explication “remains somewhat implicit.”<sup>3</sup> The following is an attempt to make their relationship explicit.

Among the many insights offered by Paul de Man about Kant’s aesthetics in a provocative essay, which aimed at correcting a misreading of the role that materiality plays in the third *Critique*, is the admission that Kant’s move into the dynamical sublime is “by no means easy to account for.”<sup>4</sup> In answer to the interpretive challenges posed by Lyotard and de Man, my account of Kantian sublimity will begin with dynamical sublimity, since it is here that one sees most clearly that the sublime involves a theme that continues to preoccupy modern philosophers, *viz.*, the transcendence of finitude. For the dynamical sublime evokes the idea of infinite power, and of our finding a form of comfort in the world of experience.

We have seen that the dynamical sublime consists in the relationship between sensibility and practical reason. Kant takes this relationship to be *excited* by experiences of extremely powerful natural objects or nature considered as *might* (KdU 5:260). In explicating the nature of this power (*Macht*), Kant cites several examples of the dynamical sublime. These adducements include threatening storms, lightening, volcanoes, hurricanes, and so on (KdU 5:261).

Because each of these natural phenomena can harm an individual, Kant stipulates that the object of the dynamical sublime must not only be powerful but also one of fear. Unfortunately, Kant does not clarify what this fear is, but his ensuing presentation of the immortal God in §28 hints that the possible results of having direct contact with the power of *might* does not exclude the fear of physical harm up to and including death.

However, Kant also insists we cannot actually be afraid of the powerful object, for then we will be incapable of aesthetic contemplation and pleasure. For example, one cannot take pleasure in viewing an erupting volcano if one is in its mouth. “For,” Kant writes, “we flee from the sight of an object that scares us, and it is impossible to like terror that we take seriously” (KdU 5:261).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, this means that one cannot find aesthetic pleasure in viewing an object that puts one’s life in actual danger. In other words, the experience of sublimity is possible only when we perceive powerful objects from a safe physical distance. However, recall that we must also feel agitation or pain for the experience to count as sublime; for sublimity, Kant has told us, is pleasure only by means of displeasure. Consequently, Kant argues that the emotional stance necessary for the dynamical sublime is to adopt, if I may employ a play on words from a famous Kantian phrase,<sup>6</sup> the model of *fearfulness without fear*, i.e., to be fearful before the powerful object *without* being afraid of it (KdU 5:260).

We perform this feat, Kant says, by merely thinking of the danger of *might* through an expansion of the imagination, and we are free to contemplate danger in this way because we are physically safe. De Man characterizes this understanding of *might* as follows:

The threatening power is not something exterior that one confronts directly in an unmediated encounter: it has been transferred, by an act of the mind (sometimes called imagination) into the constitution of an entity, a subject, capable of reflecting upon the threatening power because it partakes of that power without however coinciding with it.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the fear we experience in the dynamical sublime is not actual fear, but *imagined* fear (KdU 5:269). The sublime operates in the subject or spectator when he is on the *edge* of danger and wonder; indeed, as Kant puts it, the subject is “seized by *amazement* bordering on terror...but, since [the spectator] knows he is safe, this is not actual fear” (KdU 5:269).

This also means that the dynamical sublime calls to mind our finitude as natural, embodied beings. We realize we are physically safe and hence we do not fear for our lives in an immediate way; however, our fear before the imagined danger results precisely from the realization that we are *finite*. In having a sublime experience, we realize that we can die, that death is a real possibility for us, even if we are not in the immediate danger of dying right then.

However, while we are physically safe in the sublime experience, we are not metaphysically comfortable. For even though we know that we will not die as a result of the sublime, sublimity makes us aware of our mortality. However, as I have indicated, the sublime does ultimately leave us comforted in a metaphysical sense. How then, according to Kant, does this happen?

### III

To answer this question, we need to explain the unique relationship between reason and sensibility that occurs in an experience of the sublime. When presented with a life-threatening danger, even an imagined one, Kant says that sensibility asserts itself. What Kant means by sensibility here is our desire as embodied individuals for self-preservation. Kant calls attention to the fact that, for instance, when faced with the spectacle of a hurricane our desire for self preservation naturally intensifies because we realize the possibility of death.

However, according to Kant, we find that this impulse is no match for the seeming omnipotence of nature. Nature demands respect, and only a madman or one wishing death would taunt its terrible *might*: for example, consider Shakespeare’s Lear:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
 Till you have drench’d our steeples, drown’d the cocks!  
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!<sup>8</sup>

Lear deserves our sympathy, but unlike the mad King, we realize that if our lives were in actual danger we would have no chance to survive; e.g., a category four or five hurricane would kill us no matter how much we asserted ourselves and railed back against its power. Subsequently, we discover, in an acute way, our mortal vulnerability, i.e., our finitude as natural beings; and while our physical death is not imminent in sublimity (because we are in a position of physical safety), we realize the Samaritan Appointment that it is, nonetheless, inevitable.<sup>9</sup>

In the midst of such an awareness of our finitude we become conscious of a “supersensible” side of ourselves, namely, of our rational capacity. While sensibility is repelled by the power of nature that calls to mind the inevitability of death, reason is attracted to the spectacle because it confirms reason’s superiority to nature. This superiority consists in the fact that reason contains supersensible ideas (such as the ideas of God, the soul and immortality) that refer to what Kant calls the thing in itself (*das ding an sich*), which exist independent of nature. By means of the dynamical sublime, Kant writes that “the mind is induced to abandon sensibility and occupy itself with ideas containing a higher purposiveness” (KdU 5:246). In other words, the dynamical sublime allows us to realize that there is an aspect of ourselves that is in touch with something beyond nature and, so, is immune to death and destruction.

However, Kant locates the comforting part of the sublime not in the ideas of God and immortality (the divine), but rather in reason itself, i.e., in the aspect of the mind that *actively thinks* these ideas. Kant writes that “the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation,” namely, the rational being’s capacity to “[obey] a law” (KdU 5:257). Here it is as if reason has been presented with a choice, indeed, with a test or challenge of moral strength. The test is presented in the form of a disjunction: If one’s natural, embodied individuality were subject to danger, would reason succumb to external influence *or* would it rise above such hindrances and reassert its freedom and independence?

If one feels pleasure before the dynamical sublime, then one has chosen the latter. In particular, it is the ability of practical reason to resist the influence of nature and sensibility and instead obey its own law, i.e., to become morally autonomous, that for Kant is evidence of reason’s sovereignty. Thus, reason can take pleasure in imagined finitude because, in Kant’s estimation, the sublime “calls forth [reason’s] strength.... to regard as small the [objects] of our [natural] concerns” (KdU 5:262). We like sublimity, indeed are drawn to the sublime, because it allows us to use the “might of the mind to rise above certain obstacles of sensibility [namely, those of sublimity from which we are physically safe] by means of moral principles” (KdU 5:271). In other words, the dynamical sublime is a form of what Kant defines as the feeling of *moral respect*: reverence for the moral law in opposition to the pull of the sensuous.

Ultimately, for Kant, the sublime is further proof of reason’s rule, its sovereign power. Consequently, Kant locates the comfort provided by the sublime in reason, *viz.* in our divine nature as rational beings. The dynamical sublime comforts us before death by heralding the divinity of reason and announcing its superiority over our natural embodiment. As Kant puts it,

[T]hough the irresistibility of nature’s might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us (KdU 5:261).

The dynamical sublime enables us “to judge nature without fear and to think of our vocation as being sublimely above nature” (KdU 5:264). Winds, cataracts, hurricanes, and lightning may crack our bones and singe our heads, but they cannot crush our supersensible vocation as rational creatures. Thus, Kant defines the dynamical sublime as an aesthetic experience of “nature as a might that has no dominance over us” (KdU 5:260). More fundamentally, nature has no dominion over us because the dynamical

sublime serves as an example of our transcending finitude by having realized our supersensible divine nature.

While the dynamical Sublime is the clearest instance of transcending finitude, a case can be made that the mathematical sublime may also be interpreted as an experience in which we derive feelings of metaphysical comfort. This is no easy task, for the mathematical Sublime consists in the relationship between imagination and *theoretical reason* that is excited, if not daunted, by experiences of extremely large natural objects. How are we to understand this challenge?

Kant argues that the mathematical sublime results when a sensible perception of an object great in size evokes ideas of the “absolutely large;” in other words, “large beyond all comparison” (KdU 5:248) and “a magnitude that is equal only to itself” (KdU 5:250). Thus, the mathematical sublime points toward “what is unbounded in our power of reason, namely, the idea of the absolute whole” (KdU 5:260). To translate Kant’s terms into more ordinary language, the mathematical sublime is evocative of our idea of infinite size.

Kant explains the mental process of mathematical sublimity as evoking awe of the mind, not fear of nature. He states that we are presented with a large natural object that we perceive with our senses, e.g., imagine standing at the foot of the pyramidal Matterhorn, and looking up at its peak, perhaps partially obscured by mist and clouds. One feels engulfed in awe by the seemingly infinite size of the mountain amidst the haze which obscures it, giving the impression of utter formlessness – as though the mountain has no beginning or end. Kant writes that, at this point in the sublime experience, the part of our mind that he names ‘the imagination’ “strives to progress toward infinity” (KdU 5:250).

What Kant means by ‘the imagination’ here is the recollective and combinatory power of the mind; specifically, the capacity to reproduce and keep before one’s mind the contents of consciousness from previous moments. Kant’s use of imagination in this context is something like what we ordinarily mean by the subconscious faculty of re-presenting to oneself objects that are not currently present. However, rather than produce these objects, in this case the imagination simply recalls them from memory. Thus, when the imagination strives to progress toward infinity, it is attempting not only to grasp every part of the object (in Kant’s terms, an “apprehension”), but also to hold it all together (a “comprehension”) in one mental picture (KdU 5:251-52). That is, using our example above, in viewing the colossal Matterhorn we attempt to perceive the whole mountain, which, from our perspective, appears infinite, *all at once*.

Striving to progress toward infinity is nothing other than attempting to hold before one’s mind, in one single intuition, the entirety of the (seemingly infinite) mountain. However, while we are able, perhaps, to look it over until we have seen the entire mountain, by looking, for instance, at different parts of the mountain in succession (first the bottom, then the middle, and so on), we cannot put or hold together, in our minds, a picture of the whole mountain. By the time we have looked at the last part of the mountain, we are no longer capable of retaining an image of the first part. The mountain is simply too large, and our minds are too inadequate for the task (KdU 5:252).

It is important to note that, for Kant, the demand placed upon the imagination to perceive the whole mountain and ‘progress to infinity’ is not coming from the mountain itself; rather, it is *what reason demands*, namely, “absolute totality as a real idea” (KdU 5:250). Reason wants the totality of the object in “one intuition” (KdU 5:254). In other

words, given a *relatively* large empirical object, reason then wants an *absolutely* large one. Reason wants an actual sensible intuition of totality to match its idea of the infinite whole. In this way, Kant writes, “reason makes us unavoidably think of the infinite....as *given in its entirety* (in its totality)” (KdU 5:254). This is because it is reason’s nature to desire the infinite. As Kant puts it,

For we come to realize that nature in space and time [i.e., phenomenal nature] entirely lacks the unconditioned, and hence lacks also the absolute magnitude [i.e., totality] which, after all, even the commonest reason demands” the absolute and the unconditioned (KdU 5:268).

Kant argues that the only way for nature to evoke the idea of infinity is for the imagination to fail at capturing an object’s size. This “fruitless” endeavor is brought to mind negatively because the infinite is presented through “the inadequacy of the imagination” (KdU 5:255), which occurs when reason demands the infinite in one intuition and so inflicts “violence” upon the “inner sense” of imagination (KdU 5:259). As Kant writes in an especially revealing paragraph,

[N]othing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime. [What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. *Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power*; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling), and in contrast with that use any other use is small. Hence what is to be called sublime is not the object, but the attunement that the intellect [gets] through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment (KdU 5: 250; *my italics*).

In other words, that reason can even think the infinite, and can, on this basis, demand a sensible experience of it, *is evidence of a supersensible power within the human mind*. Thus, Kant writes that “to be able even to think the infinite as a whole indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense” (KdU 5:254). It is a triumph through failure. Put somewhat differently, the fact that imagination cannot satisfy reason, the fact that, as Kant writes, “all the might of the imagination [is] still inadequate to reason’s ideas” (KdU 5:256), is testimony that reason is sovereign.

The mathematical sublime, according to Kant, “makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility” (KdU 5:257). In this way, reason shows the limitations of the imagination in order to demonstrate its own dominance over sensibility and nature. Subsequently, nature is a means, not an end. Moreover, in an especially important passage, Kant gives credence to my view that the mathematical sublime is capable of offering us metaphysical comfort by writing that in the experience of sublimity, the rational part of the mind uses nature – including the part of humanity (sensibility) that is sunk in with nature – as “an instrument of reason and its ideas” (KdU 5:269) in order to “feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature” (KdU 5:262).

Hence, we see that, in his discussion of the mathematical sublime, Kant equates the imagination with the finite, limited, and natural part of the mind. Being sunk in with nature, the mathematical sublime makes us realize “our own limitation...and the inadequacy of our ability” in the presence of “the immensity of nature” (KdU 5:261). The mathematical sublime, however, also reveals imagination and the immensity of nature

both “as vanishing[ly small] in contrast to the ideas of reasons” (KdU 5:257). In other words, like the dynamical sublime, the mathematical sublime is comprised of an awareness of finitude and a feeling of transcendence. The mathematical sublime is not as directly tied to finitude as the dynamical sublime; however, fear before death is not solely tied to our sensuous bodies, but we can experience another fear of loss. This is evidenced by Kant’s remark that, in the mathematical sublime, the imagination perceives the sublime object as “an abyss in which [it] is afraid to lose itself” (KdU 5:258). While the dynamical sublime overwhelms us as physical beings with a sensuous desire for natural self-preservation, the mathematical sublime is perceptually overwhelming, threatening to overtake the boundaries of our perceptual capacities; however, these capacities refer to our physical embodiment, for they are rooted in the world of nature. Hence, we fear being engulfed and swallowed up by the mathematical sublime, much as we fear the absence of limits and contours found in the unending darkness of the night. We are made to realize in both the dynamical and mathematical sublime experiences that we are fragile, small, and finite in relationship to the grandeur of the universe.

Moreover, just as with the dynamical sublime, the mathematical sublime is comprised of the *simultaneous* awareness that there is a part of us which is incomparably greater than even the largest and seemingly infinite natural object. Kant states that “What makes this possible” in the mathematical sublime “is the subject’s own inability uncovers in him *the consciousness of an unlimited ability which is also his*” (KdU 5:259, my italics). We realize that we are finite, that we are not able to perceive infinity (or even objects which are relatively large); however, we also realize that our nature, i.e., our rational nature, is spiritual, for only what is supersensible can think infinity.

#### IV

The metaphysical ramifications are as follows. The discovery of our divine nature reveals the ontological inferiority of our finite nature. Reason’s idea of the infinite forced the imagination to reveal its own finitude. In this way, our finite nature stands out only against, and only because of, the supremacy of our divine nature. Overcoming death, for example, requires overcoming individuality, for it is only as individuals that we die. Insofar as reason uses sensibility, the sensuous individual is subordinated to the higher level of the supersensuous self – our nature as rational beings.

Along with other commentators, Kirk Pillow’s study of the sublime in Kant states that it is “truly through the dynamic sublime, rather than the mathematical, that Kant links his aesthetic theory to his moral philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> The identification of moral feeling and dynamical sublimity relies on the relationship between the faculties of imagination and *practical* reason (recall that Kant defines the mathematical sublime as a relationship between the imagination and *theoretical* reason; that is, reason as a cognitive and theoretical faculty). And, indeed, we have already seen how the dynamical sublime encounters a test of moral strength and is able to rise above obstacles of sensibility. Moreover, evidentiary support for this dynamically privileged view exists in the literature when Kant states, “Nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity” (KdU 5:255), as well as,

Hence nature is here called sublime [*erhaben*] merely because it elevates [*erhebt*] our imagination, [making] it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity, which lies in its vocation and elevates it even above nature (KdU 5:262),



and, furthermore,

The pleasure in the sublime in nature, as a pleasure of contemplation involving subtle reasoning, also lays claim to universal participation, yet already presupposes another feeling, namely that of its supersensible vocation, which, no matter how obscure it might be, has a moral foundation (KdU 5:292).

Understood through these passages, Kant suggests that the dynamical sublime is aligned with an experience of the infinite, of an elevation above nature, and a feeling of supersensible vocation. But what of the mathematical sublime? As shown above, commentators do not usually hold the mathematical sublime as closely aligned with the moral sphere as dynamical sublimity. Is this right, however? I should like to argue that this classificatory pride of place is open to plausible doubt via Kant's thesis of the unity of reason.

The unity of reason thesis argues that practical reason and theoretical reason are one and the same. Kant ascribes to the faculty of reason (*Vernunftvermögen*) an ability to guide itself toward its own goals pursuant to its use in distinctive domains. In its theoretical use, the faculty of reason governs the understanding in the domain of knowledge, and in its practical employment, the faculty of reason is directed at the will in the domain of human action. Because morality deals with the motivations of the will in acting, it is practical, and thus aligned with the dynamical sublime. However, the demarcation between reason in its practical and theoretical employments is less rigid than one would expect, and I wish to exploit this ambiguity for present purposes.<sup>11</sup>

So, for example, with regard to the relation between hope and happiness in the *Critique of Pure Reason*,<sup>12</sup> the question of hope takes on special, *guiding*, significance because it is "simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical *leads like a clue (als ein Leitfaden)* to a reply to the theoretical question" (KrV A805/B833); namely, as elucidated by Frederick Rauscher, the "determination of our duties...with... determining causal relations and effects, in this case, happiness."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the unity of reason thesis receives further support in Kant's *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*,<sup>14</sup>

I require that the critique of a pure practical reason, if it is to be carried through completely, be able at the same time to present the unity of practical with speculative reason in a common principle, *since there can, in the end, be only one and the same reason*, which must be distinguished merely in its application (GMS 4:491: my italics),

as well as in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,<sup>15</sup>

[I]f pure reason of itself can be and really is practical, as consciousness of the moral law proves it to be, *it is still only one and the same reason which, whether from a theoretical or a practical perspective, judges according to a priori principles* (KpV 5:121: my italics).

In addition, with specific regard to the postulate ideas of God and the immortality of the soul, which, as we have seen are two supersensible ideas of sublime experience,

Here there is, then, a basis of assent merely *subjective* in comparison to speculative reason, yet valid *objectively* for an equally pure but practical reason—whereby the ideas of God and immortality are provided, by means of the concept of freedom, with objective reality and with an authority, indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason), to assume them. This, however, does not expand reason in its theoretical cognition, but only gives us the possibility [of God and immortality], which previously was only *problem* and here becomes an *assertion*, and thus connects the practical use of reason with the elements of the theoretical use (KpV 5:4-5).

And, finally, in connection to the necessary postulates for the processive, albeit endlessly deferred, production of the highest good (*summum bonum*),

In order to expand a pure cognition *practically*, an *aim* must be given a priori, i.e., a purpose as an object (of the will) that, independently of all theoretical principles, is presented as practically necessary through an imperative determining the will directly (a categorical imperative); and here this is the *highest good*. This [good], however, is not possible unless three theoretical concepts are presupposed (for which, because they are merely] pure rational concepts, no corresponding intuition can be found, and hence, by the theoretical path, no objective reality): viz., freedom, immortality, and God (KpV 5: 134).

In all of these passages, Kant gestures toward what Onora O’Neill identifies as the desideratum that “a successful critique of practical reason should apparently show that there is a single supreme principle for practical and for theoretical reason,” which O’Neill believes is the categorical imperative itself.<sup>16</sup>

If theoretical reason is one and the same with practical reason in this desired unity, then the mathematical sublime need not be limited to producing a supersensible appreciation of the faculty of reason, but should also lead us to the supreme principle of reason, namely, our capacity to act as autonomous agents with moral vocations.

Subsequently,

- *if* (i) the mathematical sublime includes a recognition of finitude found in one’s sensuous nature,
- in addition to (ii) realizing that our nature, i.e., our rational nature, is divine, for only what is supersensible can think infinity,
- as well as (iii) a simultaneous discovery of the divine aspect of reason,
- and (iv) the desire to side with reason despite the force of the sensuous, as only one capable of morality can,
- *then* (v) like the dynamical sublime, the mathematical sublime is also a form of comfort by calling to mind moral feeling.

Attesting to this conclusion, Kant introduces this inclusive disjunction,

But it is this idea that is aroused in us when, as we judge an object aesthetically, this judging strains the imagination to its limit, *whether of expansion (mathematically) or of its might over the mind (dynamically)*. *The judging strains the imagination because it is based on a feeling that the mind has a vocation that wholly transcends the domain of nature (namely, moral feeling)* (KdU 5:268, my italics).

Consequently, it seems plausible that both the mathematical and the dynamical modes give rise to a *moral feeling* which is only possible from an autonomous standpoint that announces its elevated independence from nature, i.e., sublimity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), henceforth KdU, rather than in Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994). The

- latter is interesting in its own right; especially, for Kant's understanding of the terrifying sublime (see pp. 48-53)
- <sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism" in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 77.
  - <sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Jean-François Lyotard, *Lesson on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 118.
  - <sup>4</sup> Paul de Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant" in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 74. For a challenge to De Man's reading of Kant's formal materialism in the sublime, see Rodolphe Gasché, "On Mere Sight: A Response to Paul de Man" in *The Textual Sublime: Deconstruction and Its Differences*, eds. Hugh J. Silverman and Gary E. Aylesworth (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), pp. 109-115.
  - <sup>5</sup> The similarities (though not identities) here with Edmund Burke's association of the sublime with danger, pain, and death is also hard to overlook. In *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844), Burke writes that "[w]hen danger or pain presses too nearly, it is incapable of giving any delight, and is simply terrible" (p. 52). Kant, of course, cites Burke later in §29 (KdU 5:277), but not this passage; neither do Pluhar nor Guyer in their respective editions.
  - <sup>6</sup> I refer to the phrase, *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* or "purposiveness without a purpose" in KdU 5:220.
  - <sup>7</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 177.
  - <sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), Act 3, Sc. 2: 1-7.
  - <sup>9</sup> The reference is to William Somerset Maugham's retelling of an ancient Babylonian story in his last play *Sheppey* (1933), in which Death relates the ineffectuality of escaping one's fatal end. See W. Somerset Maugham, *Sheppey* in *Selected Plays* (London: Penguin, 1963). See also the more famous epigraph to John O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 3.
  - <sup>10</sup> Kirk Pillow, *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 73. See also Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 185, and Robert Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime from Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2015), p. 249. The common linking of supersensible feeling arising most frequently from the dynamical sublime can be explained by Kant's overwhelming use of nature as manifest examples, which seems to default most naturally to the dynamical sublime. However, as Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2009), p. 232, rightly points out, "Mountain ranges, the ocean, and the idea of infinity can evoke either the dynamical or the mathematical sublime, depending on the act of judging. For example, the ocean can be seen as a mirror or as an abyss (KU 5:270)".
  - <sup>11</sup> Among others, Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Jens Timmermann, "The Unity of Reason: Kantian Perspectives" in *Spheres of Reason*, ed. S. Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) argue that practical and theoretical reason are in equal correspondence.
  - <sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Henceforth, KrV.
  - <sup>13</sup> See Frederick Rauscher, *Naturalism and Realism in Kant's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 157.
  - <sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, 1997. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Henceforth, GMS.
  - <sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Henceforth, KpV.
  - <sup>16</sup> Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 51-52.