
The Kantian and Hegelian Sublime

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Etymologically related to the broaching of limits, the sublime constitutes a phenomenon of surpassing grandeur or awe. Kant and Hegel both investigate the sublime as a key element of aesthetics and develop their accounts within two distinct aesthetic frameworks. For Kant, the sublime is part of a larger theory of reflective judgment and hence captures a subjective phenomenon. For Hegel, the sublime is a part of a larger theory of world spirit being captured in external form and so also constitutes an objective phenomenon. The accounts thus differ at the metaphysical core: the sublime is subjective for Kant and objective for Hegel. In this paper, I compare the two theories and show that despite the ontological difference, they agree on the sublime's close link to morality. Both accounts argue the sublime's potential of encouraging individuals towards the conduct of a good, moral life. Finally, I conclude with an evaluation of the sublime's fit within the respective frameworks of Kant and Hegel and address a potential weakness in each theory.

I. Accounts of the sublime

For Kant, the sublime lies in a feeling of man's superiority

Yena Lee majored in philosophy at Yale College, where she both enjoyed and rued a distinctly Socratic education. Though the unfortunately bite-able gadfly shaped several parts of her learning, the most cherished effect is found in an observation from Kierkegaard: "In Socrates, philosophy was still just (*N.B.* this still just) – still just a life." Accordingly, she hopes to pursue graduate studies in philosophy in ethics, ancient or medieval philosophy, or Kant. Studies aside, she is also interested in the demographics of academic philosophy, which she hopes and believes – if ancient flux metaphysics is to be trusted – is changing.

over nature. It is the second type of aesthetic judgment, with the first type of judgment being the beautiful. The sublime divides into the *mathematic* and the *dynamic*. First, the mathematically sublime awakens the faculty of reason's superiority to imagination. When an individual sees an enormous magnitude in nature, the "voice of reason" demands that it be understood in its totality.¹ Imagination, the faculty responsible for judging empirical magnitudes, strives to provide the totality. But it fails: as it apprehends progressive parts of the object, it loses the parts it had previously apprehended. Because of the object's sheer magnitude – in this case, an infinite of the sensible world – the imagination loses on one side as much as it gains on the other. Thus, imagination cannot fulfill reason's demand for a totality, and the realization of this inadequacy creates displeasure. But the inadequacy quickly gives rise to something else: a realization of a supersensible faculty that *can* comprehend the infinite. Kant's proof, roughly, proceeds: imagination cannot comprehend an absolutely great magnitude, i.e., infinity, but I can think of an infinite as a whole. Therefore, I must have another faculty within me that allows me to comprehend this infinite.

This faculty is reason, and we find pleasure in discovering it. The mathematically sublime lies in this discovery, or more specifically, "the disposition of the mind" that results from finding a faculty suitable to infinity.² This faculty is superior to the imagination, which even "in all its boundlessness...[pales in] insignificance beside the ideas of reason."³ It is this mental disposition that constitutes the sublime, not the object of nature that prompts the reflection. Though we loosely speak of the sublime being in nature, "true sublimity must be sought only *in the mind* of the one who judges."⁴

This disposition rouses the proper feeling for practical law. It is "compatible with that which the influence of determinate (practical) ideas on feeling would produce"⁵ – that is, the feeling of respect. The imagination's inadequacy produces this respect. Though imagination cannot give us an absolute whole, an absolute whole that *can* be given "is one enjoined on us by a law of reason."⁶ We respond with respect, the "feeling of inadequacy of

our capacity for the attainment of an idea that is a law for us... thus the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our [recognizing that idea as law]."⁷

The *dynamically* sublime demonstrates our superiority over nature in recognizing that neither internal nor external nature has power over us. An individual is displeased to recognize his powerlessness before the brute power of "deep ravines and the raging torrents in them."⁸ But displeasure again gives rise to pleasure because it allows for the discovery of a "capacity of resistance of quite another kind"⁹ that is, the resistance to nature *inside* of us. This resistance to internal nature is one in which our humanity remains "undemeaned" against "those things about which we are concerned (goods, health, and life)... to which we are, to be sure, subjected."¹⁰ The dynamically sublime, then, is again "in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature *within us* and thus also to nature *outside us*."¹¹ Here Kant uses "nature" in two ways: (a) the nature of the deep ravine; and (b) the nature of human inclination (as opposed to, say, duty). To our pleasure, we discover in this reflection that "if it came down to our highest principles," we have the power to reject internal natural inclinations. This capacity of quite another kind, in turn "gives us the courage to measure ourselves against"¹² external nature, the power of the deep ravines.

Like the mathematically sublime, the dynamically sublime establishes a disposition compatible to the demands of practical reason. The discovery of the capacity to resist nature causes the subject to "recognize in himself a sublimity of disposition suitable to God's will."¹³ This understanding, Kant notes, separates religion from superstition: superstition leads to fear, not recognition of this dignity to resist internal and hence external nature. Religion, in contrast, leads to "the good conduct of life."¹⁴

Hegel takes up the same notion of the sublime as "the attempt to express the infinite."¹⁵ However, for Hegel, the infinite is grounded in something external to the subject: the one absolute substance, Spirit. Sublimity for Hegel has an ontological meaning, as it is "grounded in the one absolute substance *qua* the content which is to be represented."¹⁶ The absolute spirit is sub-

lime because it transcends adequate representation or expression in finite phenomena.

Hegel's sublime comes in context of the three stages of art: the symbolic, classical, and romantic epochs. Each of these stages corresponds with a development of the world spirit and its fit with phenomenal form. In the symbolic stage, the spirit is too undetermined to be captured in form. In the romantic stage, the spirit is too determined to be captured in form. The classical stage, found in the human statues of the ancient Greeks, produces the apex of art because the spirit is just developed enough to be perfectly expressed by form. These three stages break down into smaller stages; the sublime constitutes one of the latest stages of the symbolic epoch.

Though Eastern art forms approximate the sublime, the sublime "strictly so-called"¹⁷ is found in Hebrew poetry, the Psalms. These reveal the sublimity of God because they represent all of existence as completely dependent upon God. Humanity and the rest of the world are a "serving accident and a transient show in comparison with God's being and stability."¹⁸ In other words, humanity depends on God for existence and only exists to praise this sustaining power. Hegel cites Psalm 104, which depicts God covering himself with light as a garment, and stretching out the heavens like a curtain: nothing, not light nor heaven, exists in or for itself. It is but "an external vesture" for God.¹⁹

The sublimity represented herein is therefore a negative relationship. God *himself* cannot be represented by phenomena, as he transcends finitude. But the complete contrast between this Absolute and the finite can furnish, at the least, a negative understanding. The Psalms represent God as the all-powerful, all-wise, eternal creator. Everything else "is and subsists only by God's might and is there in order, in praise of this might."²⁰ This expression of the sublime is therefore negative, built off the absolute distinction between God and creation.²¹

In this distance of the infinitely different God lies the abstraction of Spirit: Hegel introduces the spirit of the sublime as "at least the foundation of the spirit... [but] not yet apprehended as concrete."²² That is, in understanding only the negative relation-

ship – the difference between God and us – we find no development of spirit that will come in later stages, which requires a more positive relation. First, this abstract spirit reveals no human immortality, as yet only the One is absolute, and finitude perishes. Second, we feel unworthiness, pain, and fear before God because of the recognition of our difference. Third, we encounter the potential for wickedness that is counter to the absolute spirit. These three points will presumably develop as spirit grows more concrete, i.e., through the Christian God addressing each: human immortality through resurrection, worthiness through reconciliation to God through Christ, and forgiveness and sanctification of wickedness. At this stage, the sublime insofar as it represents a *negative* relationship is still abstract, and thus belongs in the realm of the symbolic rather than the classical or romantic.

Nonetheless, Hegel concludes his discussion of the sublime with room for an “affirmative” relationship between humans and the sublime spirit.²³ “On the one hand,” he writes, there is the law that arises from the “substantial peace and constancy of God in respect of his will and his commands for men.” On the other hand, there is a recognition of the “complete and clear distinction between the human and the Divine.” An individual recognizes she is utterly distinct from the Divine, in that God sustains her and the rest of the world. But she also recognizes that the will that sustains the world also wills commands for her to follow. From here, she finds an “*affirmative* relation to God” insofar as she adheres to these commands, God’s laws. Adherence to the laws, i.e., adherence to the will of the Spirit, “is transferred to the individual,” and each decision for good “accru[es] to the individual” to build a positive relationship between the otherwise completely distinct and incommensurable finite and Absolute.

II. Comparisons

Kant and Hegel’s notions of the sublime thus differ at the metaphysical core. For Kant, the sublime is a subjective judgment contained within the individual. For Hegel, it is grounded in something objective and external to the subject, the absolute Spirit. While Kant investigates the question “What does it mean for

me to judge this as sublime?" – a question about our subjective judgment, Hegel questions, "What is the sublime?" – a question about metaphysics. Such a question is not up for discussion in Kant's framework of cognition, which approaches metaphysics from the side of possible human cognition. In contrast, Hegel believes the objective side of things is within our grasp and criticizes Kant for "[falling] back again into the fixed opposition between subjective thinking and objective things."²⁴

A broader point of disagreement between the two is the relationship between the form of the sublime and its content or purpose. For Hegel, art always requires some correspondence between form and content; a perfect correspondence between the two results in true art, as in the classical epoch. Even when they fail to perfectly match, as is the case in the symbolic and romantic, the general rule still remains that art requires some correspondence between form and content.

In contrast, Kant finds form and content not only to *not* correspond, but to directly clash in the sublime: "that which excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be *contrapurposive* for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation."²⁵ He continues that this contrapurposiveness does "violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that." In Kant's subjective system, "form" is the mental representation of an object that resists the purposiveness, or content, of judgment. The form of the sublime, Kant claims, is particularly unsuited to the purpose. I will return to this claim below, in the discussion of Kant's overall aesthetic system.

Though Kant and Hegel diverge on the nature of the sublime, notable similarities in the accounts still emerge. First, though nature is related to the sublime, sublimity is not, strictly speaking, contained in nature. For Kant, the subject's mental disposition constitutes the sublime, and for Hegel, the sublime is found in the negative relationship between finite nature and infinite Spirit. Subsequently, for both philosophers, no sensuous form adequately expresses the sublime. Additionally, both accounts contain a negative moment that leads to something positive: a reali-

zation of a noble power within humans that relates to moral law. For Kant, the negative moment of realizing the inadequacy of imagination and powerlessness before nature leads to the positive moment of discovering reason and our power over nature. This positive realization leads to a disposition of the mind compatible with a feeling of respect. In the dynamically sublime, we also recognize the capacity within ourselves to resist natural inclinations (and hence obey moral law). Likewise in Hegel, the representation of the negative relationship between the finite and the divine prompts a recognition of good and evil, and our power to obey or resist law, God's commands. These decisions "accrue" to us and begin to constitute an affirmative relation with the giver of these laws. Granted, for Hegel, the revelation in the direction of morality needs further development, and does not play as large a role in his theory. In contrast, for Kant, the positive moment is a defining characteristic of the sublime. Regardless, for both, the negativity initially apparent in the sublime reveals a positive moment of elevation for human nature that suits the individual to moral conduct.

III. Evaluation

The two theories may resist more immediate comparisons because each operates within a specific aesthetic framework. For Kant, the sublime fits in as a type of aesthetic judgment, and for Hegel, the sublime fits in as a development of spirit through the epoch of symbolic art. I will briefly situate the sublime into each framework, and provide one possible weakness of the theory as it fits within its system.

For Kant, there are two types of aesthetic judgment: of the beautiful and of the sublime. The two share the primary marks of an aesthetic judgment. First, both the beautiful and sublime please for themselves. Unlike a judgment of taste, say that a certain wine is tasty, the object of aesthetic judgment offers no pathologically conditioned satisfaction. The subject is not interested in the object judged as beautiful or sublime; she does not want it as she may want the wine. Second, beautiful and sublime judgments are judgments of reflection rather than of cognition.

An individual makes a *cognitive* judgment by subsuming a particular intuition under a determinate concept. For example, the specific intuition could be “this wine,” and the concept, “types of alcohol.” The judgment, “this wine is a type of alcohol,” constitutes a cognitive judgment because it requires a judgment to be made through a concept. In contrast, an *aesthetic* or *subjective* judgment arises from relation between subject and an object. The sublime therefore does not judge the object of nature to be sublime, but judges the mental disposition when viewing nature. Similarly, the beautiful judgment does not judge an object as beautiful, but judges the human satisfaction from viewing the object. Finally, beautiful and sublime judgments are both necessary and universally valid for everyone. Taste varies from person to person, but what is judged as beautiful or sublime must be beautiful or sublime for all. Given these marks of a subjective judgment and the sublime’s fulfillment of said marks, the sublime seems to fit well within Kant’s system of aesthetic judgments.

But the beautiful and the sublime differ in key respects that highlight the unique contribution of each aesthetic judgment to morality. What are these unique contributions? Beauty forms a symbol of morality itself, while the sublime forms the subjective response to morality. Kant writes that a judgment of beauty transports our reflection on one object of intuition (a beautiful object) to “another, quite different concept, [that of morality,] to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond.”²⁶ In other words, the reflection arising from surveying a beautiful object reflects the reflection that would arise from morality’s object, if it had one. The beautiful reflection hence symbolizes the beautiful. On the other hand, the sublime highlights the subjective side to morality – i.e., the feeling for moral law (respect), and the realization of our power to resist natural inclination in adherence to the law. The sublime relates not to morality itself, but the subjective feeling to morality within each individual. Differences between the beautiful and the sublime should thus reflect this difference in relation to morality.

Which they indeed do: first, beauty and the sublime differ in

pleasure: beauty pleases immediately, which, Kant claims, is similar to the effect of morality.²⁷ The sublime, on the other hand, pleases indirectly through negativity. This negativity affords the respect that disposes our mind for the proper feeling of respect for moral law. Second, they differ in their *suitability to judgment*: beauty carries purposiveness in its very form, whereas the sublime appears contrapurposive to our power of judgment. Because beauty carries purposiveness in its form, “we must seek a ground outside ourselves” for the objects judged as beautiful.²⁸ The grounding of morality, of course, lies outside of us. In contrast, the sublime appears contrapurposive to our judgment. The contrapurposiveness form does “violence to our imagination” and so reveals the faculty of reason, an internal power. The ground for the sublime, then, we find “merely in ourselves and in the way of thinking” – a mental power within the subject.

This last point on contrapurposiveness, as mentioned earlier, runs counter to Hegel’s notion that content and form should correspond, even if imperfectly. However, because Kant’s contrapurposiveness gives way to purposiveness, *viz.*, the pleasure that arises from discovering reason, Hegel may have the better understanding of the relationship between form and content. For Kant, form may initially oppose content, but the two ultimately match because form leads to purposiveness, the discovery of reason. Further, the match is not just any match, but one of perfect correspondence: “the subject’s own incapacity reveals the consciousness of an unlimited capacity of the very same subject, and the mind can aesthetically judge the latter *only through the former*.”²⁹ Because the arrival to consciousness of reason can happen *only* through the initial contrapurposiveness, this match seems to be, in the end, an example of form perfectly matching content. The form that initially resists judgment through the imagination is ultimately the only grounds through which this content can be brought about. Thus, it is possible that Hegel, not Kant, has the better understanding of content and form corresponding in aesthetics.

Hegel’s aesthetic system traces the spirit’s development from abstraction to concretion: in the epoch of the symbolic, spirit is

too abstract to find adequate expression in phenomenal form. The height of the symbolic is found in Egyptian art, which predates sublime art. An independent spirit, notably manifest through ideas of the afterlife, appears in Egyptian art. Yet it is still indeterminate, and even the Egyptians do not fully understand it. This abstraction makes Egyptian art the paradigm case for symbolic art: in symbolism, “the shape was the chief thing. It was supposed to have a meaning, yet without being able to express it perfectly.”³⁰ In other words, Egyptian art, in its form, obscurely points to (or symbolizes) something outside itself.

Symbolism proper can no longer capture spirit when it develops into the stage of the sublime, one of the final stages of symbolism. The sublime differs from the strictly symbolic in two ways: first, there is no adequate “configuration in something external, and thus far the strictly symbolic character vanishes.”³¹ Because the sublime so utterly transcends finite form, no trace of a fit between the symbol and the content remains. Second, the negative relationship is demonstrated without ambiguity – thus “in contrast to... symbol and its obscure content there is now the meaning as such and its clear intelligibility.”³² A “symbol proper... does not get beyond *striving* after the spiritual”³³ – i.e., a truly symbolic representation only obscurely points to spirit. Because the contrast between the finite and infinite is so clear, symbolism of the sublime lacks the vague striving, or pointing after, character of true symbolism.

But Hegel’s theory of the sublime may look unfit for the symbolic at the point at which the negative relationship turns positive. The epoch of the symbolic, with all its stages, is categorized by the indetermination of spirit. Is the spirit still adequately *abstract* by the time it reaches the sublime? The suspicion regarding Hebrew poetry is that, unlike Eastern or Egyptian art forms, it expresses the spirit of the true Spirit: God. The safeguard against over-development came from the entirely *negative* understanding of Spirit and human spirit: the revelation of the sublime emphasized the finitude of man and the incommensurable God. But if the sublime can lead to the start of an affirmative relationship that relates to the moral nature of man, the spirit involved

sounds more like concrete spirit.

This, however, may not be a large problem for Hegel. Typically for Hegel, the end of each stage already begins to resemble the face of the next. He does, at the least, have further developments of absolute spirit (e.g., immortality), which justify the claim that the sublime still lacks determinacy.

Kant and Hegel both develop theories of the sublime with substantial metaphysical differences which nonetheless overlap in a push towards elevating the subject towards morality. Both integrate the notion of the sublime with success into their aesthetic frameworks: for Kant, in supplying an aesthetic judgment related to morality in a way distinct from a beautiful judgment; and for Hegel, in supplying a necessary step in the progression of a spirit still adequately undeveloped through the epoch of symbolic art.

Notes

1. Kant, Guyer. 5:254
2. Ibid, 5:250
3. Ibid, 5:257
4. Ibid, 4:256 (Emphasis mine)
5. Ibid, 5:256
6. Ibid, 5:257
7. Ibid, 5:257
8. Ibid, 5:269
9. Ibid, 5:261 (Emphasis mine)
10. Ibid, 5:262
11. Ibid, 5:264 (Emphasis mine)
12. Ibid, 5:261
13. Ibid, 5:263
14. Ibid, 5:264
15. Hegel, 362.
16. Ibid, 363
17. Ibid, 371
18. Ibid, 364
19. Ibid, 376
20. Ibid, 376
21. Ibid, 376
22. Ibid, 362
23. Ibid, 377
24. Ibid, 56
25. Kant, Guyer. 5:245 (Emphasis mine)
26. Ibid, 5:353
27. Ibid, 5:354
28. Ibid, 5:246
29. Ibid, 5:259 (Emphasis mine)
30. Hegel, 372
31. Ibid, 363
32. Ibid, 372
33. Ibid, 373 (Emphasis mine)

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