Pleasure and Transcendence: Two Paradoxes of Sublimity

Tom R. Hanauer

I. Introduction

The sublime has enjoyed a reawakening in the last few decades, especially in the works of postmodernists and in the rejuvenated scholarship on eighteenth and nineteenth century European aesthetics. In her recent article "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" Jane Forsey has raised some very important concerns about these attempts at the resuscitation of the sublime. According to Forsey, these attempts all share a fundamental mistake: they assume that a theory of the sublime is possible. The sublime, she argues, cannot be theorized since there is nothing that such a theory could be a theory of: "sublimity" denotes something that, upon proper reflection, turns out to be either incoherent, contradictory, or "so limited that a general theory of the sublime will remain out of reach" (381). Forsey's argument poses a difficult challenge to anyone who takes the sublime seriously, that is, for anyone who views sublimity as more than a quirk in the annals of European aesthetics. Nevertheless, I will argue that the challenge is not insurmountable. The aim of this paper is thus to defend the coherency of the sublime as a viable aesthetic category against Forsey's challenge. I divide Forsey's challenge into two paradoxes. The first paradox (P1)—which I call the transcendence paradox—is about the *epistemological and ontological* commitments that are implicated in sublimity. The second paradox (P2)—which I call the pleasure paradox—is about the *affective* content of sublimity. As we will see, while the first paradox is dissolvable, the second paradox maintains

some traction. But, far from leading us to conclude that a theory of the sublime is impossible, the latter paradox illuminates the avenues that should be explored in future theories and accounts of the sublime.

II.1. P1: The Transcendence Paradox

According to Forsey, who follows Guy Sircello's (1993) analysis, the sublime involves two essential "themes." The first theme, which is titled "epistemological transcendence," posits that a deep kind of cognitive failure resides at the core of the experience of the sublime. In a sublime experience we are confronted with an object that resists our conceptual grasp; the object of sublime experience is completely epistemologically inaccessible to us. The second theme, "ontological transcendence," posits that the inaccessible object of sublime experience is in some sense ontologically transcendent, i.e., the object exists beyond "all of humankind's possible environments" (Sircello 545).

Here is the paradox: the two themes are in an irresolvable conflict with one another. How could we ever have an experience of an object that transcends *all* of our "possible environments"? Such an object could not, in principle, be the intentional object of any experience. And, if we do have an experience of such an object, we could not consistently commit to saying that it is epistemologically transcendent. In any case, it must be knowable or accessible in *some* sense if we can assert that it exists. The transcendence paradox, then, is this: theories of the sublime are caught in a double bind. If the theory is centered on the experience of cognitive failure—the *epistemology* of the sublime—it is left bereft of the possibility of telling us what the experience "is an experience *of*," as Forsey says, and if the theory is centered on the transcendent object—the *ontology* of the sublime—it needs to show how any sort of experience of such an object is even possible, let alone how it could be given any sort of description or a positive existential status (383). If we accept these terms, we are forced to conclude, Forsey claims, that the very idea of a sublime experience is incoherent and thus cannot be theorized. It is incoherent since no experience could simultaneously involve "epistemological transcendence" and "ontological transcendence" (the intentional object) that constitute the core of sublimity.[1]

The paradox cannot be solved, Forsey claims, by noting that the sublime often takes entities from nature as its intentional objects, e.g., ominous mountain precipices, erupting volcanoes, and so on. If natural objects are the intentional objects of sublime experience, we end up with a stark contradiction. This is simply because mountains, oceans, and natural scenery are not epistemologically inaccessible at all.

[1] It should be noted that, as we will see, although Sircello articulates the paradox, he does not think it is decisive. He thinks that a theory of the sublime remains a possibility, whereas Forsey does not.

The intentional object, in these cases, winds up being "both transcendent and familiar" (383). In other words, the sublime in nature still remains mired in paradox.

II.2. Responding to P1: The Procrustean Bed

In response to the transcendence paradox I will argue that the Forsey-Sircello analysis forces the sublime into a procrustean bed. In establishing this, I will advance three claims: (a) the analysis unnecessarily confines the sublime as such to an epistemological mode, that is to say, it disregards the non-epistemological modes of sublimity; (b) moreover, the analysis provides an unnecessarily strong interpretation of the epistemological mode; and (c) even if the strong interpretation is correct, it is unclear whether the conclusion about the incoherency of the sublime follows (although Forsey's conclusion that a *theory* cannot accommodate cases where the strong interpretation does apply might still be correct).

First, the Forsey-Sircello analysis reduces the sublime entirely to its epistemological mode. This is unwarranted since the sublime is not always, let alone necessarily, taken to involve epistemological transcendence. Contra the Forsey-Sircello analysis—and especially taking into consideration the accounts of Kant and Burke—sublimity has been commonly bifurcated into the "mathematical" and "dynamical" modes.[2] Forsey's attack seems to be geared more towards the former while leaving the latter almost entirely unaddressed. The mathematical sublime, as Kant explains, is principally concerned with the aesthetic estimation of *size*. The subject is confronted with something that is so immense and so vast such that it cannot fully cognize the object; the imagination cannot comprehend the object in its totality or synthesize it into a single intuition, e.g., as in Schopenhauer's example, when "the heavens at night actually bring innumerable worlds before our eyes" (WWR I, 205). This experience of cognitive failure comes with an unpleasant feeling of puzzlement, disorientation, incomprehension, or, in other words, an intimation of our epistemic limitations. The dynamical sublime, on the other hand, is concerned with the aesthetic estimation of *power*. The experience of dynamical sublimity does not (necessarily or primarily) involve cognitive failure, but rather a certain kind of *physical failure* instead. It involves (in part) a sense of fearfulness, terror, powerlessness, "irresistible force" (Burke 1990, II.I, 53), and so on. As Burke explains,

> Whatever is fitted … to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say,

[2] The distinction between the mathematical and the dynamical sublime comes specifically from Kant, but it is not unrecognizable in earlier accounts. It is true that this taxonomy of the sublime is somewhat arbitrary, but the point is to show that cognitive failure (epistemology) is not central to the sublime, *pace* Forsey and Sircello. There is admittedly a lingering question about the relation between the different modes of sublimity: in virtue of what are they all modes of the same thing, i.e., the sublime?

> whatever is in any sort *terrible*, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime* (1990, I.VII, 36).

And there are, of course, plenty of objects both in nature and art that can evoke this deep experience of physical failure. These objects and representations are powerful, fearful, threatening, and terrifying, but they are not (completely) incomprehensible or epistemically inaccessible—they do not resist and humiliate us as knowers but, rather, as embodied actors. The emphasis on terror, we should note, was already becoming a central aspect in (proto) theories of the sublime in the tail end of the seventeenth century, for example, in the writings of John Dennis. Dennis described terror as "a Disturbance of Mind, proceeding from an Apprehension of an approaching Evil, threatening Destruction of very great Trouble either to us or to ours … Things that are powerful, and likely to hurt, are the Causes of Common Terror, and the more they are powerful, and likely to hurt, the more they become the cause of Terror; which Terror, the greater it is, the more it is joined with Wonder, and the earlier it comes to Astonishment" (quoted in Monk 1960, 52). Indeed, Burke's theory itself is primarily concerned with the emotion of terror and the qualities that, he claims, tend to evoke it: vastness, obscurity, privations, darkness, power, and so on. Terror is the "ruling principle" of the sublime, he says (1990, II.II, 54). So if the transcendence paradox renders sublime experience incoherent, then it at best only succeeds to do so in relation to *one* mode of sublime experience: the epistemological mode. It has no clear grip on the experience of dynamical sublimity, i.e., sublimity in its non-epistemic mode. Forsey has not done enough to show why any possible theory of the dynamical sublime, like that of Burke's, must also "rest on a mistake."[3] Burke's account might be wrong, of course, but that does not mean powerful and threatening objects and our mixed, negative-positive responses to them cannot be theorized at all.

Second, and more importantly, Forsey and Sircello, in setting up the paradox, make an unwarranted assumption even in relation to sublime experience in its epistemological mode. They provide an overly strong interpretation according to which sublimity involves the presentation of an intentional object that is *wholly* epistemologically transcendent, that is, the intentional object is taken to be such that it cannot be cognized at all. If that is truly the intentional object of sublime experience, there is no surprise that theories of the sublime tend to devolve into incoherency and contradiction; they are attempting to describe an impossible experience. But sublimity in its

[3] Forsey does have more to say about Kant's account of the sublime, including its dynamical mode. She agrees that it does not fall prey to the paradox and is, therefore, not incoherent or contradictory, but is nevertheless unsatisfactory because it does posit an odd ontological entity (i.e., the noumenal subject) and it requires us to reduce the sublime to the rest of Kant's architectonic.

epistemological mode does not require us to posit the intentional object as wholly epistemically transcendent. The cognitive failure in sublime experience can be one of *partial* epistemic inaccessibility.[4] For example, Forsey misunderstands Burke's claim that the mind "cannot reason on the [sublime] object that employs it" (1990, II.I, 53; see Forsey, 381). Burke, in this context, does not mean to say that the object cannot be cognitively grasped *at all*. He means to say that it cannot be grasped *clearly*. Burke explains that

> No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear … To make any thing very terrible, *obscurity* in general seems to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of apprehension vanishes (my emphasis; 1990, II.II, 53-4).

Burke is only claiming that the object is obscure. He is not claiming that it is epistemologically inaccessible. So, while it is true that the imagination is said to be stretched to its limits in many examples of sublimity, that is not to say that the object that is encountered in such an experience is always taken to be absolutely inaccessible to human cognition *tout court*. Forsey's attack is therefore misguided because it unjustifiably forces sublime experience to conform to the strong interpretation she provides. A theory of the sublime need not account for the type of "epistemological transcendence" she and Sircello are concerned with since it is not an essential or core component of sublimity.[5]

Finally, however, a question remains about cases of sublime experience where the strong interpretation does seem to apply. The paradigmatic cases I have in mind are found in religious discourse. Sircello himself uses a number of these in explicating the paradox. He discusses, for instance, the Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical account of the experience of God. The Pseudo-Dionysus describes the revelation of God as bringing to "a halt to the activities of our minds, and to the extent that is proper, [approaching] the ray that transcends being" (Sircello 544).[6] The religious experience of God, the Pseudo-Dionysus

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[4] Sircello hints at this possibility, but does not pursue it (547).

[5] Forsey could respond that even "partial epistemic transcendence" leads into contradiction, since there is nothing epistemically transcendent about mountains and raging oceans *at all*. These objects do not involve the slightest bit of epistemic transcendence. This is true in at least one sense: we know with certainty the *kinds* of objects we are encountering, e.g., thunderstorm, oceans, and so on. But, in another sense, once we agree that the sublime object does not have to be completely beyond our grasp we become open to finding ways in which it may transcend our cognitive capacities to some degree after all. Paul Crowther (2010, 181-187) suggests that in some cases of mathematical sublimity we cannot fully comprehend the interrelations between all the *parts* of the object we are confronted with, although we may nevertheless recognize the *type* of object the parts belong to (e.g., a mountain). This can be a form of partial epistemic transcendence. The sublime, in these cases, is something that falls on a spectrum rather than being a zero-sum game, as Forsey and Sircello make it out to be.

[6] The mention of the Pseudo-Dionysus might seem odd, especially to those who share the belief that the sublime is confined to a particular historical period, most notably, eighteenth

continues, "is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of…since it surpasses everything and is wholly beyond our capacity to know it" (ibid). The transcendence paradox seems unavoidable in this case, since it seems rather clear that the two themes of the sublime are united in the Pseudo-Dionysus' account: the experience of God is wholly epistemically transcendent *and* the object of the experience—namely, God—is wholly ontologically transcendent.

But even here, in the religious cases, the paradox can be resisted. Wayne Proudfoot has argued that the term "God" functions in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive way in the Pseudo-Dionysus (1985, 125). It does not describe or denote an ontologically transcendent being but rather serves as a way of resisting any such denotation or description. The absolute ineffability of God does not describe the phenomenological content of sublime experience in this case, but is rather a grammatical *rule* that denies its reducibility to any possible symbolic system, label, or determinate description. Ineffability, which Proudfoot (following William James) considers to be a primary marker of mystical experience, is always a relative matter: "X" is ineffable only in relation to some symbolic system or other. For instance, tactile sensations are ineffable relative to color sensations. The color of a jellyfish cannot adequately capture its viscous feel. Claiming that "God is ineffable" is not predicating ineffability to God. That would be a contradiction. It is, instead, prescribing a rule for identifying an experience as a mystical one: *God*—along with other religious terms, like *Tao* and *Brahman*—serves as a "formulae that rule out in advance the appropriateness or adequacy of any description or adequacy of any description that might be proposed" (Proudfoot 1985, 129). When put in this way, the sublime experience alluded to in mystical discourse seems to come rather close to Sircello's own proposed solution to the paradox, specifically, his revised interpretation of epistemological transcendence:

> [F]or any possible given set of routes of epistemological access to "reality," that is insufficient to provide a *complete* understanding or grasp of "the real" (549).

The revised interpretation is meant to evade the problems that emerge for a theory of the sublime once an ontologically transcendent object is posited. It redirects attention only to the ways in which the limitation of human understanding is experienced. Is this a successful retort on behalf of these cases? Forsey thinks not. This is partly because, as Forsey explains towards the end of her paper, "While such descriptions or expressions may be evocative, they do nothing for a purported theory of the sublime" (388). In other words, whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must pass over in silence. The 'mystical sublime'

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and nineteenth century British and German Romanticism, as Mary Mothersill (1984) and James Elkins (2011) believe. I reject this view. The sublime, I think, denotes an experience that predates the term "sublime." But I will not argue for this view here.

cannot answer the most important questions that a theory of the sublime is called to address, e.g., "What kinds of objects are sublime?" and "What does the sublime tell us about ourselves as subjects?" (Forsey 388).[7] I am inclined to agree with Forsey that the mystical sublime cannot be theorized in a satisfactory sense, but this does not rule out the possibility of theorizing the sublime as such, as I hope to have made clear. We need not take "epistemological transcendence" (or ontological transcendence) to be the central or unifying theme of sublimity and, hence, accounting for it should not be taken as an obvious desideratum of a theory of the sublime. Claiming otherwise is forcing the sublime into a procrustean bed.

Nevertheless, Forsey's questions retain some force. I think that the motivation behind the questions she poses, and hence what I take to be the real thrust of her critique, is to challenge the theorist to adequately explain what is *distinctive* about sublimity if it is not going to be epistemological or ontological transcendence. The importance of Forsey's article lies partly in shifting the burden back onto the theorists. In the remainder of this paper I want to explore this issue by addressing Forsey's critique of Malcolm Budd's theory. As I will explain, Forsey attempts to saddle Budd's account of sublimity with two problems. The first problem concerns the object, while the second concerns the affective experience that the subject undergoes. The second problem, what I call the "pleasure paradox," will take up the bulk of the discussion.

III.1. P2: The Pleasure Paradox

According to Forsey, Budd's account can be read as a variation of Sircello's "revised thesis."[8] Budd's theory, like Sircello's revised thesis, does not posit any bizarre ontological entities and remains focused on the subject's experience. Budd's description of the sublime experience is as follows:

> With the sudden dropping away … of our everyday sense of the importance of our self and its numerous concerns and projects, or the normal sense of the security of our body from external natural forces, the heightened awareness of our manifest vulnerability and insignificance …

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[7] It is worth noting that Forsey never explains what she means by a "theory" of the sublime. This remains an ambiguity in her paper. Sircello does provide an answer to this question. For him, a theory of the sublime is an account of its object, i.e., the object that is called "sublime" (545). However, towards the end of his paper, Sircello seems to abandon this view when he says that a theory of the sublime may still be possible if we go with the revised epistemological thesis and stop ourselves from making any ontological commitments whatsoever, that is, if we leave the object *out* of the theory (549).

[8] I think it is misleading to read Budd this way. It is true that his account avoids "ontological transcendence" and is therefore aligned with Sircello's revised thesis. But, on the other hand, Budd's account is not purely epistemological. Like Kant and Burke, he also discusses powerful phenomena in nature that pose an existential threat to human life. Forsey does seem to recognize this but she uses Budd's account as a target for showing why Sircello's revised (epistemological) thesis won't do.

> is, after the initial shock, experienced with pleasure (2003, 85).

The focus of this account is on the experience of being overwhelmed by some object in nature and coming to a kind of pleasurable awareness of one's vulnerability and the limitations of one's powers as a natural being. Budd's theory—unlike Kant and the German idealists—does not flee into the comfort of the "supersensible" (whether it is God, moral freedom, or the ideas of reason). He remains on earth. But this is also what leads his theory into trouble, according to Forsey. The problems that Budd's theory faces can be usefully formulated through a deeper comparison with Kant's own theory.[9]

On Kant's account, as it is commonly interpreted, judgments of sublimity, i.e., judgments of the form "X is sublime," are ultimately explained through a connection that Kant sets up between the experience of sensory frustration (cognitive or practical) and the "supersensible side" of our being: our freedom as moral beings or the "ideas of reasons" and our capacity to think them.[10] The sublime experience consists of an exhilarating kind of "negative pleasure" (Kant 2000, §23, 5:245) that is felt upon a (safe) encounter with objects in nature that are overwhelmingly powerful, terrifying, formless, vast, or incomprehensible: the starry heavens, erupting volcanoes, a stormy ocean, and so on. For Kant, these objects are especially well-suited for generating that anxiety-laden elevation of the soul that constitutes the feeling of the sublime. The explanation for this is that these sorts of objects provide us with a kind of intimation or feeling of the rational "vocation" of the mind (2000, §28, 5:262). As *natural* beings we are dwarfed by nature, but as rational beings we *transcend* it.[11] In the case of the dynamical sublime, for example, Kant writes,

> 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 those 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 (2000, §28, 5:262).

According to Kant's theory, the distinctive exhilaration of the sublime—the feeling of our "power" being called forth by nature—is explained through this connection with our moral or rational capacities as supersensible beings. One might argue on behalf of Kant that the

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[9] Budd himself builds his account through a critical discussion of Kant's theory of the sublime (66-89).

[10] See chapter 13 of Henry Alison's *Kant's Theory of Taste* (2001).

[11] Kant does not think we are always explicitly *aware* of this in sublime experience. Instead, Kant is more concerned with providing a transcendental account of the sublime, that is, he is explaining what makes sublime experience (and judgments) possible. For more, see Robert Clewis' *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (2009), especially 72-79 and 219-226.

threatening and incomprehensible objects found in nature are uniquely capable of evoking this kind of pleasure because they (unlike most of the objects of culture) are so clearly and powerfully indifferent and sometimes even contrary to human ends, values, and concerns. The ways in which these objects conjure up our puniness, powerlessness, and fleetingness as natural creatures can only be offset by summoning up, if only implicitly, our infinitely greater powers as supra-natural creatures: as self-determining, autonomous, free, and rational, moral beings.

Budd's theory, like Kant's, places the locus of the sublime in the self. But, unlike Kant, Budd does not take our rational "vocation" to be the redemptive or pleasurable basis of sublimity. The explanatory buck of his theory of the sublime seems to stop with the feeling of vulnerability itself. According to Forsey, this is what leads Budd's theory into serious trouble. Forsey singles out two particular problems, but, as I mentioned above, I will devote most of the attention to the one I take to be more decisive: the pleasure paradox.[12]

The first problem has to do (once again) with the object of the sublime. As Forsey argues, on Budd's account, *any* object at all could be the potential object of sublimity so long as it leads us to feel the kind of pleasurable vulnerability he describes (386). Thus the 'sublime' might arise when I am faced with, say, an especially difficult math problem or a crossword puzzle that I am incapable of solving or if I narrowly escape a traffic accident and so on (see Forsey 386). Forsey thinks this is fatal for a theory of the sublime. Her reasoning seems to be motivated, at least in part, by thinking that a theory of the sublime should strive to preserve the strong historical connection between nature and sublimity, a connection that persists in Budd's own account for that matter. So, she claims, since "Budd's rejection of Kant's moral goals causes us to lose the initial reasons for focusing on the vast, formless, and threatening aspects of nature alone," his theory cannot be a satisfactory one (386). But, as I see it, there is no real problem here. First, as we already know, sublimity has been attached to many types of objects other than natural ones, including spiritual or divine entities, artworks, architecture, ideas, moral exemplars, and so on.[13] And, second, the things that make these objects evocative of the sublime in the first place are certain *qualities* that they have rather than the types that they belong to. They can be overwhelming in their size, power, or greatness (etc.) such that they evoke the mixed emotional response that is characteristic of the sublime in the subject who experiences them. It is the qualities that are at issue, not the types of objects that these qualities are attached to.[14] We should, of course,

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12 The pleasure paradox is not a central part of Forsey's general critique of the sublime, but it is a key reason she employs for rejecting Budd's account. It is also worth considering given its place in the history of the theoretical discourse on the sublime.

13 But see Emily Brady, 2013, chapter 5, for the contrary view. Brady provides an argument for the view that the "original" sublime is found first and foremost in nature and not in art.

14 It must be said, however, that the sublime depends on context. There are some things that

inquire about and attempt to theorize the qualities that are typically evocative of the sublime, but there is no reason (a) to think that these qualities can only be instantiated by objects in nature, or (b) that a theory of the sublime should only focus on these qualities when they are instantiated by objects in nature.[15] And, once we recognize that it is the qualities that matter rather than the types, we can resist the claim that the sublime can be "*anything at all*" even if it is divorced from the exclusive domain of nature.

The second problem—the pleasure paradox—is about the affective content of the sublime. Budd's theory cannot explain how the initially and typically painful experience of vulnerability could give rise to the *pleasurable* aspect of the sublime. This paradox, I claim, is also related to Budd's rejection of the "supersensible" elements in Kant's account. For Kant, as we saw, the sublime is pleasurable because it involves shoring up our own powers as rational or moral beings vis-à-vis nature. But, once this route is denied, it becomes unclear why becoming aware of our cosmic insignificance or impotence against the forces or magnitudes of nature should be pleasurable in any sense. So, the pleasure paradox is concerned with how it is that incomprehensible, threatening, or overwhelmingly powerful objects can come to be experienced in that peculiarly pleasurable way that characterizes sublimity.

III.2. Responding to P2: Human Agency

The pleasure paradox is old and many solutions (some even already present in Longinus) have been offered in response to it.[16] But here I want to critically examine one potential solution—offered in the recent works of Katerina Deligiorgi—that locates the pleasure of the sublime in the experience it affords us of our identity as human agents. I will argue that the solution does not work. But, as I claim in the concluding section, Deligiorgi's article, along with Forsey's, usefully points the way forward to future theories.

Katerina Deligiorgi's recent neo-Kantian theory of the sublime posits that the pleasure of the sublime comes from our getting a momentary and rare intimation of the nature of our *agency* as human beings situated in the world. The vulnerability that we experience at the hands of "contra-purposive" phenomena illuminates the ways in

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may be sublime for the ordinary human but will not be sublime for particular individuals, depending on their situation, their history, their culture, and so on. But this should not be seen as a serious problem for a theory of the sublime. If I happen to find the Egyptian pyramids more sublime than (say) my Egyptian tour guide, who has seen the pyramids on countless occasions, that does not mean my tour guide cannot recognize or agree with my judgment even if she herself is no longer moved by them in the same way as I am now.

15 For a broader discussion of the place of the object in a theory of the sublime, see Robert Clewis' "A Theory of the Sublime is Possible" in this issue. I should add, too, that none of this is to say that we can ever come up with strict principles or laws for evoking the sublime or cases where somebody *must* find some particular object to be sublime.

16 See the first chapter of James Kirwan's *Sublimity* (2005) for some of the early solutions to paradox, e.g., those proposed by Addison and Dennis, as well as their relation to Longinus.

which we are passive beings in relation to the world, but it equally illuminates the ways in which we are active in relation to the world as well—we are limited in some ways but capable in others. It frees us from an all-encompassing sense of responsibility towards the world as a whole, but also rejuvenates our sense of potentiality for successful action in our own lives. As Deligiorgi says, the pleasure is connected to the awareness of the mere "form" of our agency (2016, 201). She explains that

> The sublime affords us a practical release … we cannot do anything when confronted by the immeasurable and the terrifying, but, because we do not need to either, we become receptive to our identity as active beings … We are at one with ourselves insofar as we recognize ourselves as finite subjects of the experience (2016, 202).

The pleasure of the sublime thus consists of a kind of satisfied contemplation of one's proper place in the world: we are not gods, but we are not the playthings of nature either. Some things are in our power, while other things are not.

Deligiorgi's account, however, will not suffice for overcoming the pleasure paradox. I have two reasons for suspecting this: (a) it is difficult to see why an awareness of one's agency (in Deligiorgi's sense) would be experienced with pleasure at all, especially in paradigmatic cases of the sublime. In these cases, I would argue, the obstacles we confront represent (if only indirectly) a serious threat to the things we care most deeply about. These objects provide us with the sense of our smallness, insignificance, and mortality. Insofar as the objects of the sublime can be linked to death and annihilation, they make us feel like the playthings of nature where we would like most to feel like gods. Or, to put it more mildly and in Deligiorgi's terms, the sublime emphasizes our passivity where we would like most to feel our activity. True, one may still recognize, as Deligiorgi claims, that there are some things one can accomplish. But it is not satisfying to recognize that I can accomplish some *minor* ends if I simultaneously recognize I cannot accomplish my *highest* ends. Contemplating one's place in the world as an agent is not a pleasurable experience, if the place one occupies is characterized by a lack of practical control or a state of total epistemic darkness in relation to the things that matter to us. This is why the content of our "identity as active beings" matters to a theory of the sublime. We need to recall that the objects of the sublime are contra-purposive, i.e., they pose a resistance to our ends in some sense or other. Some ends and values are, on the whole, more important and central to our lives as *human beings* than other ends and values. And (b) even if this sort of awareness should lead to some kind of pleasure, it is unclear why it should produce a rapturous exhilaration and not, instead, the quieter pleasures of stoic resolve or resignation or even a shrug of the shoulders. Taken together, (a) and (b) demonstrate that if we follow Deligiorgi's view we do not end up with a satisfactory theory

of the sublime since we are left bereft of a clear explanation for how it is possible to experience with pleasurable exhilaration objects that pose or represent a deep threat to the ends that matter to us most—e.g., the achievement of a deep understanding of the world, living up to the demands of morality, leading a happy life, alleviating the suffering of others, and so on.[17]

III.3. Conclusion

Forsey's important article raises serious questions about the possibility of generating a theory of the sublime. But, as I hope to have shown, the main paradox that motivates her (and Sircello's) critique does not present a decisive case against such a possibility. The "transcendence paradox," as I have called it, forces the sublime into a procrustean bed by reducing it to an overly-strong epistemological mode.[18] But, while the transcendence paradox can be overcome, the pleasure paradox has turned out to pose an ongoing problem. I do not have the space to survey all the solutions that have been proposed to the paradox, but the problems encountered in Deligiorgi's theory—which is the most recent solution on offer—show that the paradox remains a live one. In any case, none of this should dissuade us from thinking that a theory of the sublime is possible. It simply poses a demand to clarify and explain the affective content of sublimity and its source. The distinctiveness of the sublime, I think, will ultimately rest in clarifying its affective content and the relation it holds to objects in the world. The sublime does tell us something interesting about what it means to be human. We are peculiar animals who can aesthetically appreciate and take pleasure in things (nature and artifacts) that, in virtue of their sheer power or magnitude, seem to contradict our cognitive, sensory, and existential aims and capacities. As long as we continue to be moved in this way the sublime will retain its relevance for our self-understanding.

In concluding this paper, I want to briefly explain how Deligiorgi's and Forsey's articles can help us set down some criteria that a theory of the sublime should meet. First, our theory should be able to explain the pleasurable-painful character of the experience *without* neglecting either side of the affective divide. Some theories unjustly drop the negative emotions in favor of the positive ones, while other theories unjustly focus on the negative emotions and lose track of the positive ones. Deligiorgi's theory, to its merit, does not fall into

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17 For a longer discussion and critique of Deligiorgi's paper, see Hanauer 2016. See Deligiorgi 2016 for a reply.

18 It is not so clear that Forsey still accepts the conclusions of her 2007 paper. In a more recent work on the still life paintings of Chardin, Forsey writes, "Chardin disconcerts because in a simple pot and two onions, we are faced with the limits of language, the limits of understanding, and the limits of human experience. His work is both puzzling and an "embarrassment" for his contemporaries because, rather than a reflection of the known, it suggests to us a vista that is ultimately unreachable. In this way his work is not only beautiful; it is sublime" (2014).

this trap. The unpleasant aspect of the sublime is not negated or lost through the pleasurable feeling of our "higher purposiveness" as agents (to borrow Kant's phrase). Instead, the painful aspect opens us up to something we can take pleasure in, namely, our identity as finite agents, without the displeasure being completely extinguished in the process. Second, Forsey's article usefully shows us why a theory of the sublime should not lose track of the object. The feeling and judgment of the sublime is responsive to an object in the world. Kant (as he is usually read) and many of his followers take the 'true object' of the sublime to be ourselves, as we have seen. The problem is that this does not conform to the way in which we ordinarily think about aesthetic appreciation. When we appreciate something as "sublime," we take the object to be the proper bearer of the aesthetic predicate rather than ourselves. When I call a storm at sea "sublime," I am not confusedly referring to myself instead. The object is the bearer of aesthetic value, and a theory of the sublime—assuming that we now agree one is possible—should be able to accommodate this commonsense intuition.

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