

Paul Guyer on Robert Clewis's "The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom"

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ROBERT CLEWIS | *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* |
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By Paul Guyer

Robert Clewis's book *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* is a rich and thoughtful examination of Kant's concept of the sublime, of the interface between Kant's aesthetics and his practical philosophy, and of Kant's attitude toward moral enthusiasm, which he effectively argues is by no means entirely negative but also has a positive role to play in Kant's account of political progress. In my comments, I want to focus on several issues concerning the sublime more than enthusiasm.

First, I want to consider some general questions connected with the idea that the experience of sublimity could count as a "revelation" of freedom; second, I want to consider Clewis's claim that there is a "pure" as well as "dependent" experience and judgment of the sublime; and third, I want to consider his claim that Kant recognizes the "moral sublime" as a distinct category of the sublime from the "dynamical sublime", the only variety of the sublime that Kant himself explicitly distinguishes from the "mathematical sublime" in the 'Analytic of the Sublime'.

Clewis begins his work by reporting a fourfold schema I previously published for analyzing the moral significance of the experience of beauty and arguing that the same schema applies to the experience of sublimity, which I did not do. On my account, morality itself requires that (i) we understand the moral law and what it requires of us; (ii) we must believe that we are in fact free to choose to do what the moral law requires of us; (iii) we must believe that the ends morality imposes upon us can actually be achieved and thus that it is rational for us to attempt to achieve them, in accordance with an interpretation of "ought implies can" as a completely general canon of rationality, applicable to prudential as well as purely moral practical reasoning; and that (iv) we must have an adequate motivation for our efforts to be moral.

I then argued that (i) pure natural beauty and adherent artistic beauty, involving aesthetic ideas, can "offer a sensuous presentation of the moral law itself" and of related concepts or ideas, whether symbolically as in the case of natural beauty or more directly as in the case of aesthetic ideas; (ii) the feeling of our freedom of imagination in the experience of beauty can make "palpable to us as sensory creatures" the "freedom of the will that we can intellectually infer from our consciousness of the moral law"; (iii) the existence of beauty is a "hint" that nature is amenable to the realization of our cognitive objectives that also suggests to us that nature is amenable to the realization of our moral objectives; and that (iv) the experience of beauty prepares us to love disinterestedly" (Clewis, pp. 10–11).

Clewis wants to argue that these same conditions are satisfied by the experience of sublimity and moral enthusiasm in their several varieties, but he focuses on conditions (ii) through (iv): he quotes Kant himself as saying (ii) that the experience of the sublime makes "palpable in ourselves a purposiveness that is entirely independent of nature", our capacity to act in accordance with morality rather than inclination; (iii) that the experience of the sublime and even more so the experience of moral enthusiasm, such as that of the spectators of the French Revolution that Kant discusses in a famous passage in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, "can be an empirical and phenomenal moral sign" of the possibility of our achievement of the goals of morality, in particular the possibility of the institution of a rightful state as morality demands, an achievement "that unfolds in the course of nature"; and finally (iv) that such experience prepares the spectator for disinterested action and even action contrary to their own personal interests (Clewis, pp. 11–12).

About all of this I want to say of course "bravo", but also to emphasize that Kant's conception of *making palpable* must always be distinguished from a conception of *making known* in a strict sense, and thus that if *revelation* is considered to be a form of *knowledge*, the experiential and symbolic pay-off of aesthetic experience, including the experience of the sublime, must always be considered something other than revelation. My conception of Kant is that, at least after the 1760s, he always considered human beings to be twofold creatures, with a rational and sensible nature, both of which must be involved in actual moral conduct. In particular, contrary to the customary caricature, Kant did not think that humans could act morally out of pure reason alone, contrary to or in the absence of all feelings whatsoever; rather, he considered view, beginning in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and culminating in the 'Doctrine of Virtue' of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, is that the proximate cause of human action in the phenomenal world is *always* feeling, but that morally worthy action is proximately

caused by feelings that have been generated or cultivated *and* conditioned by our knowledge of the moral law and the determination of our noumenal will to abide by it.

Further, morally worthy action in the phenomenal world also requires empirical knowledge, including of course ordinary knowledge of what the circumstances before us are, technical knowledge of what we could do to effect any alteration in those circumstances, and knowledge of what the moral law requires of us in such circumstances, knowledge that Barbara Herman calls "moral salience" but that Kant himself in the 'Doctrine of Virtue' ascribes simply to "conscience" as an "aesthetic", which is to say sensory and empirical, "precondition of the susceptibility of the" empirical "mind to concepts of duty" (AA 6:399ff.).

What is crucial to observe in all of this is that Kant never treats aesthetic experience as an independent source of *knowledge*, pure or empirical, of concepts or contents that we need for our moral conduct, but always treats it as a source of *feelings* that may complement *those feelings* that do arise more directly from actual moral knowledge. And thus Kant also never treats the feelings arising in aesthetic experience as *necessary conditions* of moral actions, only as feelings that may "prepare" us or buttress us in our efforts to be moral, which however do involve feelings that are necessary conditions of moral action in the phenomenal world, for example the other three "aesthetic preconditions" that Kant enumerates in the Introduction to the 'Doctrine of Virtue', namely general "moral feeling", probably the equivalent of what he earlier called "respect", and the more specific feelings of "love" for humanity and "self-esteem", as well as the feelings of "sympathy" (*Mitleid*) that he mentions later in that text.

Two further points should be mentioned here. First, although in the *Groundwork* Kant insists that the feeling of respect is entirely "self-wrought" by the determination of the will by the moral law, he does not actually say that about the "aesthetic preconditions" of the mind's susceptibility to concepts of duty in the 'Doctrine of Virtue'; he says rather that these are independent endowments from nature that should be *strengthened* and *cultivated* in light of our overarching commitment to the moral law. Second, and even more important, he also emphasizes in his subsequent treatment of feelings of sympathy that such feelings must be *conditioned* by our commitment to the moral law, presumably meaning by this that we must call upon conscience as the empirical voice of the moral law to make sure that particular actions prompted by such feelings, even when they have been carefully cultivated out of our commitment to the moral law, are in fact what is morally appropriate in those particular circumstances.

It seems to me that both of these points, but particularly the latter, must be kept firmly in mind in considering the moral value of aesthetic experience. Various aesthetic experiences produce feelings that can indeed help move us to morally worthy action, and that does not contradict Kant's theory of moral worth, because his considered view is that in the phenomenal world all action, even morally worthy action, is proximately caused by feelings. And aesthetic feelings as well as moral feelings proper can and should be "cultivated" because of this role. But aesthetic feelings do not result directly from any genuine knowledge, unlike the feeling of respect in Kant's earlier account, although it could well be argued that in Kant's mature account of the "aesthetic preconditions" of moral action, those feelings also do not result directly from any moral knowledge but are only cultivated in the light of such knowledge—indeed, perhaps that is part of the reason why Kant explicitly calls moral feeling, love of humanity, and self-esteem *aesthetic*.

And most important of all, aesthetic feelings proper, perhaps even more so than moral feelings proper, must be *conditioned* by our knowledge of and commitment to the moral law: we must always be prepared to check that the actions they might prompt us toward are indeed compatible with or called for by the moral law, because since these feelings do not arise directly from any knowledge of the moral law, there is always the danger that they might lead us astray. To put this point another way, even when enthusiasm is a potential force for the good, it always has the potential to lead us astray, and thus must be conditioned by direct acquaintance with the moral law. That's what makes it "enthusiasm". I do not mean to suggest that Clewis is ignorant of any of this, to be sure, but only that it may need more emphasis than he gives it. It certainly needs more emphasis than I gave it in my original account of the potential moral value of the experience of beauty.

I turn now to two more specific and interrelated issues, namely Clewis's argument that Kant recognizes pure as well as adherent (or dependent) judgments of sublimity and his argument that Kant recognizes the moral sublime as a distinct subcategory of the sublime, a genuinely aesthetic experience, however, that is also distinct from the feeling of respect. My initial response to the idea of a pure judgment of sublimity was sceptical: after all, it is essential to Kant's accounts of both the mathematical and the dynamical sublimities that at some level a concept in the general sense, although an idea of reason in Kant's specific sense, must be involved, in the one case the idea of infinitude and subsequently of our own power to form an idea if not an image of it, and in the other the idea of the freedom of our will and of our power to determine our will by

the moral law in spite of other feelings or fears; and is not the necessary involvement of something conceptual or intellectual in an aesthetic experience enough to make it adherent rather than pure?

Thus, I was tempted to think that all judgments of the sublime must fall into the category of adherent aesthetic judgments that Kant illustrates with the cases of adherent judgments of beauty, the idea of beauty, and most cases of artistic beauty. But not only did Clewis adduce a quotation in which Kant indubitably manifests his own acceptance of a pure judgment of the (mathematical) sublime, not "in products of art [...] where a human end determines the form as well as the magnitude" of the object, "nor in natural things whose concept already brings with it a determinate end", "but rather in raw nature [...] merely insofar as it contains magnitude" (KU §26, AA 5:252–3, cited at Clewis, pp. 100–1); he also gives a compelling explanation of how Kant can recognize a pure judgment of the sublime while allowing that all experiences of the sublime involve some role for concepts or ideas of reason: namely, adherent aesthetic judgments are ones that involve in some way a concept of the purpose or purposiveness of their *object* rather than any concept of the purpose or purposiveness of the *subject*, the one having the aesthetic experience and making the aesthetic judgment. In Clewis's words:

Dependent judgments are still judgments of the sublime, but they incorporate a concept of the object's end into the judgment and are partly based on that concept. It is important to see that the "concept" in dependent judgments of the sublime is not to be confused with the *idea of reason*, on which all judgments of the sublime are ultimately grounded (p. 102).

Thus, in the experience of raw nature as mathematically sublime, the *object*, the vast mountain range for example, can present itself to us as apparently formless and purposeless (although of course Kant will argue in the 'Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment' that in another context, namely once the idea of the purposiveness of nature has been brought in upon us by our experience of organisms, the whole of nature, and thus even mountain ranges, may appear purposive to us—see especially KU §67, AA 5:378–9), even while the *subject's response* to the object may in some way invoke and involve the idea of infinitude and of the subject's own power to form the idea although not an adequate image of infinitude. And the same would hold in the case of the dynamical sublime: the object that invokes and involves the idea of the freedom of the will and its superiority to mere nature in the subject's experience is not itself something to which that idea is applied. Thus, the judgment is pure rather than adherent: adherent judgments must exclude concepts or ideas of purposiveness from their characterization of the object, not from the experience of the subject.

I think this is exactly right, and I only want to stress even more than Clewis does (at pp. 97–9) that we need this analysis to make sense of pure judgments of beauty as well as of sublimity. This is because the core of Kant's account of even pure judgments of beauty is *subjective purposiveness*, the idea that a beautiful object is felt to satisfy some purpose in or of the *subject* even while the *object* is not subsumed under any concept of its purpose. Kant stresses in §12 of the third *Critique* that the "judgment of taste", which at this point in his exposition means the pure judgment of beauty, involves "subjective purposiveness in the representation of an object without any end (objective or subjective), consequently the mere form of purposiveness in the representation through which an object is *given* to us" (AA 5:221), not any conception of purposiveness in the object. He explains well what he means by this in the first draft of the Introduction to the work, namely that a reflecting judgment is aesthetic if

the power of judgment, which has no concept ready for the given intuition, holds the imagination (merely in the apprehension of the object) together with the understanding (in the presentation of a concept in general) and perceives a relation of the two faculties of cognition which constitutes the subjective, merely sensitive condition of the objective use of the power of judgment in general (namely the agreement of those two faculties with each other).—Section VIII, AA 20:223–4

I have always understood this passage to mean that the pure experience of beauty and pure judgment of taste result from a condition that we experience with pleasure because we experience it as satisfaction of *our* purpose in cognition, *subjectively* described—bringing our sensible and intellectual faculties into agreement—without what is the ordinary objective condition of cognition, namely applying a concept, *a fortiori* a concept of its purpose, to the *object*, or without the application of any such concept playing a determinative role in the experience. In other words, even in the paradigmatic case of pure beauty we apply no concept of purpose to the *object* but still in some way experience the satisfaction of *our own* most fundamental cognitive purpose. The distinction that Clewis makes between awareness of purposiveness in the object and awareness of purposiveness in the subject in order to make sense of Kant's notion of a pure judgment of sublimity is thus also necessary to make sense of the starting point of Kant's entire aesthetic theory, namely the pure judgment of beauty.

Finally, I want to turn to Clewis's defence of the idea of the moral sublime, for which I think that the point I have just accepted from him causes some problem: at the very least, if the moral sublime should count as an aesthetic experience at all, it can only count as an adherent rather than pure aesthetic experience. There

can be, of course, no argument that Kant uses the language of sublimity in characterizing moral feeling; he does not merely suggest an analogy between the pain-pleasure structure of the feeling of respect and the pain-pleasure structure of the feeling of sublimity (which Clewis explores in useful detail), but also explicitly calls duty "sublime" in the second *Critique's* chapter on respect (AA 5:86) and elsewhere. And of course Kant was hardly alone in using the language of sublimity in connection with moral demands and moral feelings. But instead of thinking of Kant as having intended to *add* a category of the moral sublime to a standard distinction between (in Kant's terms) the mathematical and dynamical sublime, I think we should see Kant as having attempted to *distinguish* the genuinely aesthetic sublime, especially the dynamical sublime, from the ordinary interpretation of the sublime as an essentially moral category, precisely by means of the distinction between properties of the *object* and awareness of the state or powers of the *subject* that Clewis has shown so convincingly is the basis for Kant's distinction between pure and adherent judgments of sublimity as well as beauty.

Most treatments of the sublime in the first part of the eighteenth century recognized two forms of sublimity, which we can distinguish, combining Kant's terminology with Clewis's, as the mathematical sublime and the moral sublime: authors recognized a feeling of awful pleasure at the magnitude of nature and at great manifestations or expressions—in real life or in art—of moral strength, virtue, or heroism. There are many examples of this in the British literature on the sublime, but we can also find an example closer to Kant's home in Baumgarten, who divides "aesthetic magnitude", which is his term for the sublime (see *Aesthetica* §179), into "natural" and "moral", the former "to be ascribed to that which is not more closely connected with freedom" and the latter to be "ascribed to objects and thoughts insofar as they are more closely connected with freedom" (§181); the latter is particularly connected with exemplars of virtue (§182). In other words, "natural aesthetic magnitude" is an experience triggered by non-moral agents, "moral aesthetic magnitude" an experience triggered by moral agents—or in each case what we *conceive* as such. In particular, the objects of the experience of moral aesthetic magnitude have to be *cognized* as such, as moral agents, in order for us to have this experience: we have to have knowledge of their moral accomplishment—and thus of the moral law to which they are living up—in order to experience them as morally sublime.

I believe that Kant is perfectly happy to accept the ordinary use of the language of sublimity with reference to the feelings associated with our knowledge of the moral law, of the possibility and actuality of moral accomplishment, of exemplars of great moral strength, and so on, but that what he means to be arguing by the introduction of the category of the dynamical sublime is that insofar as any

experience of the sublime associated with morality is to count as properly or at least as purely aesthetic it *cannot* be triggered by *cognition* of a properly moral *object*, involving a moral conceptualization of that object, whether the object be the moral law itself or representation thereof, the concept of duty, an actual or literary example of moral virtue or heroism, or so on. Of course such objects, so conceived, trigger powerful, elevated feelings, feelings commonly described as sublime, but they are not properly or at least purely aesthetic because they involve a determinate conception of their *object*. What Kant is doing in his account of the dynamical sublime is showing that raw nature, something that does not, in Baumgarten's terms, have its own connection to freedom, can nevertheless invoke in us, as sensible creatures, a feeling of our own freedom to determine our actions by the moral law, something that we know at a purely intellectual level that we can by the "fact of reason" argument of the second *Critique*, but something that we may *feel* in the face of nature without thinking of nature itself as any kind of moral agent—or indeed, without thinking of any moral agency as behind nature.

Clewis of course emphasizes that the moral sublime is not the same as the dynamical sublime,

since the moral sublime is a response to the moral law (or a representation or embodiment thereof), and more directly reveals the human capacity for morality, whereas the dynamical sublime reveals this capacity more indirectly. Moreover, the object that elicits the moral sublime, in contrast to the dynamical sublime, is not a powerful object in nature (p. 87).

But in response to this statement I want to emphasize two points: first, that the dynamical sublime should not be understood as "revealing" the human capacity for morality in any strictly cognitive sense, but only as producing a *feeling* of awe which the properly disposed and prepared person may interpret as some sort of sign of a capacity that can be *known* only from her consciousness of her obligation under the moral law; and second, that Kant's whole point in introducing his own account of the dynamical sublime is to show that there is an aesthetic experience that is quite distinct from the ordinary moral feelings that can be subsumed under the concept of the moral sublime, a feeling of our moral power that is not triggered by any moral content or agent at all but by raw nature. I think that including the moral sublime as a subcategory of the aesthetic sublime runs the risk of masking Kant's departure from the conventional thought of his time rather than emphasizing it.

That criticism aside, I found little to object to and much to admire in Clewis's work. I am glad to have had this opportunity to ruminate a bit on some of the issues that it raises.

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