

Immanuel Kant. Extracts from *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790.¹

A. The Mathematically Sublime.

Definition of the term 'sublime'.

Sublime is, the name given to what is *absolutely great*. But to be great and to be a magnitude are entirely different concepts (*magnitudo* and *quantitas*). In the same way to *assert without qualification (simpliciter)* that something is great, is quite a different thing from saying that it is *absolutely great (absolute, non comparative magnum)*. The latter is *what is beyond all comparison great*. -What, then, is the meaning of the assertion that anything is great, or small, or of medium size? What is indicated is not a pure concept of understanding, still less an intuition of sense; and just as little is it a concept of reason, for it does not import any principle of cognition. It must, therefore, be a concept of judgement, or have its source in one, and must introduce as basis of the judgement a subjective finality of the representation with reference to the power of judgement. Given a multiplicity of the homogeneous together constituting one thing, and we may at once cognise from the thing itself that it is a *magnitude (quantum)*. No comparison with other things is required. But to determine *how great* it is always requires something else, which itself has magnitude, for its measure. Now, since in the estimate of magnitude we have to take into account not merely the multiplicity (number of units) but also the magnitude of the unit (the measure), and since the magnitude of this unit in turn always requires something else as its measure and as the standard of its comparison, and so on, we see that the computation of the magnitude of phenomena is, in all cases, utterly incapable of affording us any absolute concept of a magnitude, and can, instead, only afford one that is always based on comparison.... (94-95)

B. The Dynamically Sublime in Nature

Nature as Might.

Might is a power which is superior to great hindrances. It is termed *dominion* if it is also superior to the resistance of that which itself possesses might. Nature considered in an I aesthetic judgement as might that has no dominion over us, is *dynamically sublime*.

If we are to estimate nature as dynamically sublime, it must be represented as a source of fear (though the converse, that every object that is a source of fear is, in our aesthetic judgement, sublime, does not hold). For in forming an aesthetic estimate (no concept being present) the superiority to hindrances can only be estimated according to the greatness of the resistance. Now that which we strive to resist is an evil, and, if we do not find our powers commensurate to the task, an object of fear. Hence the aesthetic judgement can only deem nature a might, and so dynamically sublime, in so far as it is looked upon as an object of fear.

¹ Immanuel Kant. *The Critique of Judgement*, 1790, translated with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

But we may look upon an object as *fearful*, and yet not be afraid of it, if, that is, our estimate takes the form of our simply *picturing to ourselves* the case of our wishing to offer some resistance to it, and recognising that all such resistance would be quite futile. So the righteous man fears God without being afraid of Him, because he regards the case of his wishing to resist God and His commandments as one which need cause *him* no anxiety. But in every such case, regarded by him as not intrinsically impossible, he cognizes Him as One to be feared.

One who is in a state of fear can no more play the part of a judge of the sublime of nature than one captivated by inclination and appetite can of the beautiful. He flees from the sight of an object filling him with dread; and it is impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained. Hence the agreeableness arising from the cessation of an uneasiness is *a state of Joy*. But this, depending upon deliverance from a danger, is a rejoicing accompanied with a resolve never again to put oneself in the way of the danger: in fact we do not like bringing back to mind how we felt on that occasion-not to speak of going in search of an opportunity for experiencing it again.

Bold, overhanging, and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover within us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.

In the immeasurableness of nature and the incompetence of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*, we found our own limitation. But with this we also found in our rational faculty another non-sensuous standard, one which has that infinity itself under it as unit, and in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and so found in our minds a pre-eminence over nature even in its immeasurability. Now in just the same way the irresistibility of the might of nature forces upon us the recognition of our physical helplessness as beings of nature, but at the same time reveals a faculty of estimating ourselves as independent of nature, and discovers a pre-eminence above nature that is the foundation of a self-preservation of quite another kind from that which may be assailed and brought into danger by external nature. This 262 saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence. In this way external nature is not estimated in our aesthetic judgement as sublime so far as exciting fear, but rather because it challenges our power (one not of nature) to regard as small those things of which we are wont to be solicitous (worldly goods, health, and life), and hence to regard its might (to which in these matters we are no doubt subject) as exercising over us and our personality no such rude dominion that we should bow down before it, once the question becomes one of our highest principles and of our asserting or forsaking them. Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to a presentation of those cases in

which the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature. (109-112)

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General Remark upon the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgements.

‘In relation to the feeling of pleasure an object is to be counted either as *agreeable*, or *beautiful*, or *sublime*, or [absolutely] *good*....

As the motive of desires the *agreeable* is invariably of one and the same kind, no matter what its source or how specifically different the representation (of sense and sensation objectively considered). Hence in estimating its influence upon the mind the multitude of its charms (simultaneous or successive) is alone relevant, and so only, as it were, the mass of the agreeable sensation, and it is only by its *Quantity*, therefore, that this can be made intelligible. Further it in no way conduces to our culture, but belongs only to mere enjoyment.- The *beautiful*, on the other hand, requires the representation of a certain *Quality* of the Object, that permits also of being understood and reduced to concepts, (although in the aesthetic judgement it is not so reduced,) and it cultivates, as it instructs us to attend to finality in the feeling of pleasure. – The *sublime* consists merely in the *relation* exhibited by the estimate of the serviceability of the sensible in the representation of nature for a possible supersensible employment. The *absolutely good*, estimated subjectively according to the feeling it inspires, (the Object of the moral feeling,) as the determinability of the powers of the Subject by means of the representation of an *absolutely necessitating law*) is principally distinguished by the *modality* of a necessity resting upon concepts *a priori*, and involving not a mere *claim*, but a *command* upon everyone to assent, and belongs intrinsically not to the aesthetic, but to the pure intellectual judgement. Further, it is not ascribed to nature but to freedom, and that in a determinant and not a merely reflective judgement. But the *determinability of the Subject* by means of this idea, and, what is more, that of a Subject which can be sensible, in the way of a *modification of its state*, to *hindrances* on the part of sensibility, while, at the same time, it can by surmounting them feel superiority over them-a determinability, in other words, as moral feeling-is still so allied to aesthetic judgement and its *formal conditions* as to be capable of being pressed into the service of the aesthetic representation of the conformity to law of action from duty, i. e. of the representation of this as sublime, or even as beautiful, without forfeiting its purity – an impossible result were one to make it naturally bound up with the feeling of the agreeable.

The net result to be extracted from the given of both kinds of aesthetic judgements up in the following brief definitions:

The *beautiful* is what pleases in the mere estimate formed of it (consequently not by intervention of any feeling of sense in accordance with a concept of the understanding).

From this it follows at once that it must please apart from all interest.

The *sublime* is what pleases immediately by reason of its opposition to the interest of sense.’ (117-118)