The Significance of *Nichtigkeit* in Schopenhauer’s Account of the Sublime

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**Introduction**

Schopenhauer is rightly included as one of the great contributors to eighteenth and nineteenth century investigations into the nature of ‘the sublime’ — a distinctive and somewhat philosophically perplexing type of aesthetic experience. Despite the fact that Schopenhauer’s sustained critical attention to the sublime [*das* *Erhabene*] occupies relatively little of his published corpus—primarily §39 of *The World as Will and Representation*, *Vol. 1*—his observations have been much discussed. Schopenhauer entered the existing debate from a philosophically interesting angle: his idiosyncratic metaphysics uniquely augmented—and in some cases radically revised—the then prevailing conceptions of the sublime. Yet this has not always been fully appreciated.

This paper has two aims. The first is to elucidate how: (1) Schopenhauer’s broader philosophical commitments to metaphysical monism and pessimism inform a decidedly *existential* account of the sublime that is interestingly distinct from competing positions, where ‘existential’ is understood as concerning how a subject may, as a result of metaphysical insight, come to practically orientate themselves towards features of the world which are hostile to their aims of self-preservation and wellbeing. The second aim is: (2) to inquire as to what extent (if any) this account of the sublime could offer the conceptual resources for the more characteristically Nietzschean project of life affirmation (i.e. of finding life to be good or meaningful). Both of these aims, it will turn out, depend crucially on comprehending the importance of the concept of “nothingness” [*Nichtigkeit*] that Schopenhauer deploys as a part of his theory of the sublime; a feature which has yet to receive adequate treatment in this context.

The paper ends by briefly drawing attention to how working through these issues reveals that prevailing assumptions about theism’s *exclusive* claim to certain fundamental human experiences—namely: a humbling sense of reverence and ‘sacredness’—are dubious. On the contrary, these experiences are shown to be possible in an atheistic framework, even one as throughly pessimistic as Schopenhauer’s, and are afforded by his account of the sublime, as it is interpreted here.

**1. Schopenhauer on the Sublime: an Existential Account**

While the origins of the concept of the sublime in European thought can be traced as far back as the 1st century, its emergence as a distinctive aesthetic category was cemented in the 18th century. A major point of reconfiguration that occurred at this point was the bifurcation of aesthetic experience into the sublime on the one hand and the beautiful on the other. In the work of Burke, Alison, Kant, Schiller, and others, the sublime was no longer *continuous* with beauty as the latter’s pinnacle, but a different *kind* of aesthetic experience altogether. In general terms, the beautiful came to be thought of as a wholly pleasurable experience, while the sublime was thought to be more phenomenologically complex. There are certain kinds of objects—grand mountain ranges, starry night skies, storms, avalanches, colossal cathedrals or temples, even wild animals—the contemplation of which is uniquely characterised by pleasure *and* a particular form of pain, namely: fear of a perceived threat to our self-preservation.

Schopenhauer’s most consistent position on the beautiful and the sublime broadly accepts these terms of bifurcation. In doing so, he joined the ongoing endeavour to offer the most plausible answer to two further substantive questions:

* + - 1. what precisely is the *source* and *nature* of the pain essential to the sublime?;
			2. how is the *pleasure* characteristic of an aesthetic experience produced *from* this pain?

Schopenhauer’s most direct answer to both of these questions is captured in the following passage:

Simultaneously, he feels himself as individual, as the feeble phenomenon of will, which the slightest touch of these forces can annihilate, helpless against powerful nature, dependent, abandoned to chance, a vanishing nothing in face of stupendous forces; and he also feels himself as the eternal, serene subject of knowing, who as the condition of every object is the supporter of this whole world...This is the full impression of the sublime (*WWR 1*: 225-226)

The two points being made that correspond to the above are: (a) sublime objects generate pain by the feeling of enfeeblement that they induce; (b) pleasure, nonetheless, is occasioned by a timeless identification with the world as a whole, facilitated by temporary epistemic privilege as to the essential nature of reality. The finer details of this account are still obscure, however. Let us briefly explicate Schopenhauer’s theory, considering (a) and (b) in turn.

Schopenhauer clarifies the manner in which sublime pain is generated by accepting the Kantian distinction between the ‘dynamically’ and ‘mathematically’ sublime, as laid out in the *Critique of Judgement* (*CJ* 5:248-66). In cases of the dynamically sublime, we confront objects which are perceived as threatening to our physical being: there is “sight of a power that is incomparably superior to the individual and that threatens him with annihilation” (*WWR 1*: 229). The awesome power of natural forces are typical instances of this form of the sublime:

Nature in storming motion; the gloaming through threatening black storm clouds; enormous, barren, hanging rocks that interlock so as to cut off our view; rushing, foaming masses of water; complete desolation; the howling of the wind as it cuts through a ravine. Our dependency, our struggle with hostile nature, our will which is broken in this struggle, these now come vividly before our eyes (*WWR 1*: 228-229)

In such cases, the relatively pathetic status of our causal efficacy is made painfully aware to us. Mathematically sublime objects, on the other hand, operate not in virtue of any *causal* threat they present to the observer, but through making her “forcibly aware of the immensity of the world” (*WWR 1*: 230). Certain natural or man-made objects—the starry night skies, high mountains, Xerxes’s army crossing the Hellespont, St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome—confront the observer with an immense *scale* of greatness relative to their own, making them strikingly intimate with the insignificance of their being: “from the mere presence of a mere magnitude in space and time, a magnitude immense enough to reduce the individual to nothingness” (*WWR 1*: 229).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Schopenhauer adds further subtlety to Kant’s distinction by distinguishing between different types of triggers for the mathematically sublime. He writes that certain objects “arouse the impression of the sublime by reducing us to nothingness in the face of their spatial magnitude *or their advanced age*, i.e. their temporal duration, and yet we revel in the pleasure of seeing them” (*WWR 1*: 231 - emphasis mine). Such objects (which could *also* be spatially immense) might include the “colossal ruins of antiquity”—e.g. the pyramids, the remains of Persepolis, or the coliseum—fossils, meteor fragments, and cave art. Schopenhauer appears to hold, plausibly, that temporal perspective alone—“reflecting on the millennia past and the millennia to come” (*WWR 1*: 230)—often makes us experience fearful inadequacy and futility characteristic of the mathematically sublime, yet he does not indicate whether it produces a stronger effect than other forms. In all cases of the mathematically sublime, however, we “feel ourselves reduced to nothing…like drops in the ocean, fading away, melting away into nothing” (*WWR 1*: 230). We shall return to the significance of this feature of ‘nothingness’ imminently.

Schopenhauer’s answer to how pleasure is produced from these painful impressions to give the full sublime effect is both highly distinctive and controversial. Put in broad terms, sublime pleasure occurs when there is calm contemplation [*Betrachtung*] of an object which produces the fearful pain and appreciation of the Platonic Idea it represents, despite the fact it legitimately threatens wellbeing. Here, the observer is “raised above [*hinausgehoben*] himself, his own person, his own willing” (*WWR 1*: 226), and transcends his striving-based empirical existence. Schopenhauer is adamant that, though there is a common element with the appreciation of beauty (i.e. the pleasurable contemplation of a Platonic Idea), the sublime is unique not *just* in the route via which we experience this pleasure, but in the qualitative nature of the experience itself.

Contrary to orthodox interpretations of Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime, I believe he offers two distinct forms of this pleasurable elevation [*Erhebung*]. The first form is derived from the conscious struggle in resisting the will in the face of a threat to our personal wellbeing. Of the sublime, he says: that “state of pure cognition is gained only by means of a conscious and violent tearing free from relationships between the same object and the will (relationships that are recognized as unfavourable) by means of a free and conscious elevation over the will and the cognition relating to it” (*WWR 1*: 226). In wrestling free from the egoistic concerns that consume everyday experience, we enjoy that this freedom has been *won*, and become conscious of our *strength* to achieve this. Let us call this the *Achieved Autonomy Thesis*.

The second form of elevation in sublime experience is derived from the transcendence of the egoistic perspective—i.e. of individual willing—and conscious identification with the world. Schopenhauer’s transcendental idealism, like Kant’s, maintains that the world as it appears to us is made possible by elements of our own cognition. The sublime brings to our attention that we, the “eternal, tranquil subject of cognition that, as the condition of all objects, carries and supports just this entire world, with the terrible struggles of nature merely as its representation” (*WWR 1*: 229). Unlike Kant, however, Schopenhauer is committed to a distinctive brand of monism, according to which the plurality of individual entities we perceive in everyday experience is merely an illusion manufactured by our cognitive faculties, and that all appearances are fundamentally manifestations of the *same* underlying reality. The elevation in recognising ourselves as the epistemic supporter of the world is, consequently, an *identification* *with* it, and not a sense of pride in our superior cognitive capacities qua individual. Let us calls this the *Identification Thesis*. Schopenhauer draws the link between the epistemic point and the *Identification Thesis* explicitly towards the end of *WWR 1*, §39:

our immediate consciousness that all these worlds really exist only in our representation, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure cognition [*nur als Modifikationen des ewigen Subjekts des reinen Erkennens*], which is what we find ourselves to be as soon as we forget individuality, and which is the necessary, the conditioning bearer and support of all worlds and all times. The magnitude of the world, which we used to find unsettling, is now settled securely within ourselves: our dependence on it is nullified by its dependence on us. Yet we do not reflect on all this straight away; instead it appears only as the felt consciousness that we are, in some sense (that only philosophy can make clear), one with the world, and thus not brought down, but rather elevated [*gehoben*], by its immensity (*WWR 1*: 230)

It is important to clarify exactly what the value and significance of sublime experience is for Schopenhauer. Both accounts of pleasurable elevation matter to Schopenhauer in wholly *existential*, as opposed to *moral*, terms.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the first form of sublime pleasure—the *Achieved Autonomy Thesis*—the freedom we win from the victorious struggle over our inclinations is valuable not because of how it may help us treat others, but because it furnishes the subject with an awareness of an important capacity for functionally (dis)engaging with a hostile world. The second form of sublime pleasure—the *Identification Thesis*—stems purely from a transcendent perspective of one’s place in the world relative to ordinary experience. In the final section of this paper, I shall return to some of the relevant ways in which sublime experience can shape our practical orientation towards the world. But for now, what is important to note is that Schopenhauer’s account does not seem to include a moral component, but is instead wholly existential.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There has, however, recently been some resistance to this purely existential interpretation in the secondary literature. It will be instructive to briefly explain the motivation for this resistance, and why there are good reasons to think it is misplaced.

The *Achieved Autonomy Thesis*, on the surface, looks remarkably close to the Kantian account of sublime pleasure, according to which one acknowledges one’s rational power over, and thus freedom from, one’s natural inclinations. On Kant’s view, pleasure is derived from the feeling of respect [*Achtung*] that the human observer has fortheir own rational natures: it “makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility” (*CJ*, §27: 114). Since, for Kant, this rational power is the basis of human autonomy—and thus, the source of our ‘dignity’ [*Würde*]—the sublime has *moral* significance as an intimation of the demands of the moral law. Sandra Shapshay writes that Schopenhauer’s *Achieved Autonomy Thesis* indicates “a pronounced echo of Kant’s notion that one gains a felt recognition of one’s moral autonomy in sublime experience”, and while she notes that “Schopenhauer’s understanding of autonomy is more akin to the power of stoic detachment than Kant’s rational self-legislation” (Shapshay, 2012a: 19; cf 2012b), she takes this to be evidence that Schopenhauer offers a “transformed” yet characteristically Kantian theory of the sublime. Sophia Vasalou goes further in locating a moral commitment in Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime that is noticeably Kantian in spirit, claiming that “it is evident that it is the notion of dignity or self-esteem that provides the happening of the sublime with its main dramatic theme” (Vasalou, 2013: 38).

A number of commentators have emphasised a broad continuation of Kantian themes in Schopenhauer’s theory of the sublime (e.g. Young, 1987: 100; Wicks, 2008: 105; Shapshay, 2012a, 2012b; Vasalou, 2013: 35). This is understandable, after all in the appendix to *WWR 1*, Schopenhauer praises Kant’s theory of the sublime as “[b]y far the most excellent thing in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*” (*WWR 1*, ‘Appendix’: 532). However, despite this praise for Kant’s “correct classification” (*WWR 1*: 229) of the sublime and the maintenance of some of its key conceptual distinctions, his own account differs in fundamental ways relevant for our purposes.

Schopenhauer himself claims that he “parts ways with [Kant] completely” concerning the sublime’s “inner essence” (*WWR 1*: 229). One of the respects in which there is a clear departure is that Schopenhauer’s own theory of the sublime will “allow neither moral reflections nor hypotheses from scholastic philosophy to play a role” (*WWR 1*: 230). This creates difficulties in drawing too close an affinity between Schopenhauer and Kant’s accounts in the way that the *Achieved Autonomy Thesis* might, by itself, suggest. While Shapshay can (and does) acknowledge this explicit rejection of a *moral* component to the sublime, at the same time recognising a common conception of freedom in both positions,[[4]](#footnote-4) this passage is more of a problem for Vasalou’s interpretation, which places the highly moralised notion of dignity at the centre of Schopenhauer’s view. Vasalou remarks that Schopenhauer rejects Kant’s moral freedom in the sublime only with “an impatient flick of the hand” (Vasalou, 2013: 35); a flaw which obscures how close his own account is to Kant’s. However, this is hardly the case, and reflects too close a reading of §39 in isolation from the text as a whole. Schopenhauer’s attack on the allegedly uniquely human faculty of *Vernunft* that underpins Kant’s account of dignity and consequent demotion of reason to an instrumental status is both sophisticated and ubiquitous in his critique of Kant’s epistemology (see *WWR 1*, ‘Appendix’), and especially his ethics (see *BM*, §3-11). More would need to be done, then, to discharge the burden proof for a moral reading that aligns with Schopenhauer’s own claims.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**2. Nichtigkeit**

Schopenhauer’s wholly existential account of the sublime departs from Kant’s position—as well as competing existential accounts—in a further way that concerns the nature and status of fear. For Kant, the fear we experience as a component of the sublime is superficial in an important way. As has been noted and criticised (e.g. Brady, 2013: 156-157; Young, 2013: 88, 157-160; Vandenabeele, 2015: 107-108), Kant takes there to be no genuine fear in sublime experience: “We cannot pass judgement at all on the sublime in nature if we are afraid. For we flee from the sight of an object that scares us, and it is impossible to like terror that we take seriously” (*CJ*, §28: 120). So for Kant, sublime pleasure can only occur “provided we are in a safe place” (*CJ*, §28: 120). The puzzle of how sublime pleasure can occur is purportedly solved by making a distinction between an object’s intrinsic properties and our relation to the object. He holds that we can “consider an object fearful without being afraid of it” (*CJ*, §28: 119), and illustrates this idea with the example of the fear of God: even if we do not transgress God’s laws and incur his wrath, we can be conscious of his power over us *should* we transgress them.

The superficial fear in Kant’s theory of the sublime is a continuation of the view defended by Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (*PE*) of 1757. While Burke, as is well known, described terror as “the ruling principle of the sublime” (*PE*, 58), he held that this terror is “capable of producing delight” only “if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person” (*PE*, 4: VII). For Burke, the pleasure produced by sublime experience is derived precisely in the *reassurance* or *relief* from the conscious realisation of this safety. In this way, the “pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious” (*PE*, 4: VII). The fear is thus superficial because it is wholly imagined and hypothetical.

However, Schopenhauer’s own view runs counter to Kant and Burke in this respect. He insists on a genuine “obtrusive, hostile relation” of sublime objects to the will; one that in “perceiving and acknowledging” those threats “that are terrible to the will”, the agent “consciously turns away from” (*WWR 1*: 226-227). There are two features of Schopenhauer’s account of the real fear in sublime experience that deserve special attention. The first concerns the painful sense of our “nothingness” [*Nichtigkeit*]—also described as our “insignificance” [*Unbedeutsamkeit*] or our feeling of being a “vanishing nothing” [*ein verschwindendes Nichts*]—that is provoked by sublime experience.[[6]](#footnote-6) This sense is important to Schopenhauer partly because it is provoked by genuine epistemic privilege about the nature of reality. Nichtigkeit is generated by being confronted with our meagre spatial and/or temporal being (as in the mathematically sublime), or our pitiful causal inefficacy (as in the dynamically sublime). These channels of experience track the *truth* (according to Schopenhauer’s brand of monism) that we are mere empirical manifestations—badly distorted and inherently conflicted ones at that—of a metaphysically deeper, yet arational and purposeless, reality. The crucial point to underscore is that, for Schopenhauer, this feeling of Nichtigkeit is thus not *merely* a feeling, but also an *objective condition* in a way that it is not for Burke or Kant. We as empirical individuals *really are* pathetically unimportant when considered from a cosmic perspective:

It is truly unbelievable how vacuously and meaninglessly [*Bedeutungsleer*] (viewed from the outside) and how dismally and insensibly (viewed from the inside) life flows away for the vast majority of human beings. It is a feeble yearning and a torment, a dream-like whirl through the four ages of life through to death, accompanied by a series of trivial thoughts. They are like mechanical clocks that are wound up and go without knowing why; whenever someone is begotten and born, the clock of human life is wound again so it can play the same hurdy-gurdy that has already been played countless times, movement by movement, beat by beat, with insignificant [*unbedeutenden*] variations (*WWR 1*: 348)

There is additional metaphysical significance to Nichtigkeit in the way in which Schopenhauer attempts to solve the paradox of the sublime. At present, it may be hard to see how—if we are genuinely (and justifiably) fearful of powerful or vast objects—pleasurable ‘elevation’ can be experienced through calmly contemplating the Ideas. Schopenhauer’s distinctive solution to this puzzle begins with an initially obscure claim that in order to be both elevated *and* feel the pain of fear, there must be a “continual recollection” of the will whilst contemplating the Ideas. This is to say that a prerequisite for fear, which is an essential component of the sublime, is a threat to something’s interest in self-preservation. Without this, it seems there would be little to distinguish the sublime from the will-less pleasure of the beautiful after all. So there must be a will present in sublime experience, but the difficulty is in explaining how this can be so without undermining the possibility of elevation above it.

Schopenhauer confronts this difficulty by drawing an important distinction between the threat that an object poses to a *personal* will, and the threat an object poses to “human willing in general [*das menschliche Wollen überhaupt*]” (*WWR 1*: 226). If an object is threatening to my personal will, and I maintain a view of the object in relation to my will, the fear for my personal safety will preclude any aesthetic contemplation generally, as Schopenhauer understands it. So in order to preserve the possibility of aesthetically appreciating the object, the “continual recollection” must be of the human will in general; a constant reminder of the object’s threat to *humanity*. As he states, the struggle to experience the sublime…

…must not only be won with consciousness, but also be maintained, and it is therefore accompanied by a constant recollection of the will, yet not of a single individual willing, such as fear or desire, but of human willing in general, in so far as it is expressed universally through its objectivity, the human body (*WWR 1*: 226).

The experiences afforded by the sublime are thus, for Schopenhauer, transcendent in an extraordinary way: our emotions of fear are not *personal* in the everyday fashion orientated by our will. Instead, a unique and more *universal* manner of feeling is achieved; one that “stand[s] outside of all relations determined by the principle of sufficient reason” (*WWR 1*: 227), and which produces an *identification* with the world. A consideration of what Schopenhauer has to say about the “sublime character” is fruitful in grasping this point: “[w]hen he looks over the course of his own life with all its misfortunes he will not see *his own individual fate* so much as the *fate of humanity in general*, and thus he will conduct himself more as a knower than as a sufferer” (*WWR 1*: 231 - emphasis mine). Nichtigkeit, again, is not merely a condition of the individual, but it is a property of humanity generally.

Schopenhauer frequently highlights this mirrored relation between the character of the individual and that of the species. For example:

As I have said, each *human life*, surveyed as a whole, displays the qualities of a tragedy and we see that life as a rule is nothing more than a series of dashed hopes, thwarted plans and errors recognised too late. . . This accords entirely with my world view, which regards existence itself as something that should not be, as a kind of going astray from which our knowledge of the same is supposed to bring us back. Mankind, *ho anthrôpos*, is in the wrong already generally speaking, inasmuch as he exists and is human, consequently it is wholly in keeping with this that also each individual human being, *tis anthrôpos*, surveying his life, finds himself throughly in the wrong. That he realises this generally is his redemption, and for this he must begin to recognise it in the individual case, i.e., in his individual course of life. For everything that applies to the genus applies also to the species. (*PP2*, §172a; cf. *WWR 2*, §46)

The individual and the species, like everything else in the empirical world, are mere manifestations of an aimless will. It is consciousness of the threatening relation of an object to humanity generally— the comprehensiveness of Nichtigkeit—which there is “continual recollection” of in sublime experience.

This point has sometimes been overlooked in commentary (e.g. Brady, 2013: 94-99; Vasalou, 2013). Yet this is a mistake, I propose, for at least two philosophically interesting reasons beyond the role it plays for Schopenhauer in explaining the paradox of the sublime. First, the distinction puts distance between Schopenhauer’s existential position and competing existential positions such as (arguably) Burke’s, thereby better mapping the conceptual terrain. In Burke’s account the sublime is induced by a moment of confrontation with a *personal* threat (and for this reason might be labelled *narrowly* existential). Schopenhauer’s account, by contrast, is at least in large part constituted by an (accurately) perceived threat to humanity *as such*, and for this reason might be labelled *widely* existential. This broader existential viewpoint is one that Schopenhauer is more frequently concerned to take up (e.g. *WWR 1*, §16: 111, §63: 88, §67: 402; *PP 2*, §150, §172a). The second reason that overlooking or understating the distinction between the individual and general will is a mistake is that it may have implications for the project of life affirmation which gained interest in the latter half of the 19th century. This is the subject of the final section.

**3. The Existential Implications of the Sublime: Nichtigkeit and Affirmation**

Schopenhauer was consistently committed to the truth of philosophical pessimism: the claim that given the predominance of pointless suffering intrinsic to existence, life is not worth living, and that non-existence is preferable to existence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Despite this commitment, Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime is constituted by a pleasurable identification with the natural world (as opposed to a feeling of superiority over it, following Kant). Recently, Bart Vandenabeele (2015) has argued that it is precisely this *Identification Thesis* that offers a Schopenhauerian basis for the *affirmation* of life as worth living. But if Nichtigkeit is a large part of what makes Schopenhauer’s theory of the sublime distinctive, how might this be possible?

When Schopenhauer writes that the sublime offers “an elevation above one’s own individuality [*das eigene Individuum*]” (*WWR 1*: 230), this transcendence, achieved by piercing through the veil of Maya, is a ‘eureka moment’ of clarity whereby we are no longer deceived. We grasp the fundamental unity of all things, and find a form of *pleasure* in becoming “one with the world” (*WWR 1*: 230). Vandenabeele harnesses this “joyful identification with the whole” for what he describes as “an aesthetic exemplar of a unique path toward *embracing* suffering instead of succumbing to life-denying forces” (Vandenabeele, 2015: 168). Because a form of pain is an essential component in experiencing sublime pleasure, the idea is that the cause of this pain can be ‘justified’, ‘affirmed’, or found to be ‘meaningful’ under the right conditions. In a crucial passage, Vandenabeele writes that:

sublime phenomena and environments seem to justify aesthetically the very agony they cause. By occasioning pleasure through what is really rough, disharmonious, and disturbing, they contribute to deepening our valuation of life, including its disturbing and hostile facets. Sublime experiences offer sufficient energy to prevent us from collapsing under the burden of overwhelming life and stir up our desire to affirm even nature’s most horrifying and destructive phenomena. (Vandenabeele, 2015: 168)

This type of affirmation, Vandenabeele holds, is “not ultimately moral but fundamentally existential and life enhancing” because it shows “how pain can become exquisitely pleasurable and how even the utmost terror can be transformed into a joyful identification with and affirmation of the will to life” (Vandenabeele, 2015: 120). On this view, the identification of the self with world is “joyful” because in transcending our ordinary experience as endlessly striving beings, we gain a close sense of what Vandenabeele calls the *sacred*: a “reaching beyond the empirical world” via a “metaphysical communion” with all appearances (Vandenabeele, 2015: 174). It is this profound (and much longed for) sense of *meaning* bestowed to existence which is what makes the sublime such a powerful experience. Thus, part of the existential import of the sublime is its ability to practically shape our attitude towards life in a specific, affirmative manner: it offers “the amoral, aesthetic energy to rejoice in the bleak, horrific, and terrifying aspects of life” (Vandenabeele, 2015 : 168).

As I suggested earlier, there is a *prima facie* tension in Schopenhauer’s commitment to pessimism and his characterisation of life in terms of Nichtigkeit on the one hand, and (following Vandenabeele) any alleged life-affirming conception of the sublime on the other. Sublime experience may be thought to be psychologically beneficial in facilitating a positive affective disposition towards life,even if, as a matter of fact, life is fundamentally bad and thus unworthy of affirmative attitudes. But because Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime involves genuine metaphysical insight into the horrific *truth* about life, it is difficult to see how his account can offer the tools to find life joyous and worth living. Vandenabeele acknowledges this tension, and concedes that “Schopenhauer’s relentless pessimism prevents him from fully recognising this affirmative potential of the sublime and misses the opportunity of adequately developing its profound relation with the sacred”, continuing that his analysis nonetheless “hints at it by justly insisting on” the sublime’s “metaphysical significance” (Vandenabeele, 2015: 175).[[8]](#footnote-8) However, the “affirmation” of life in this context is deeply ambiguous, and could mean one of at least three things:

**A1**: Life (or the world) is, at the most fundamental level, good and valuable.

**A2**: Life (or the world), is fundamentally bad, but can be made to *appear* good via aesthetic experience.

**A3**: Life (or the world), is fundamentally bad, but the manner in which we realise this and adjust our behaviour accordingly can nonetheless be *meaningful*.

Vandenabeele appears ambivalent about which form of “affirmation” is relevant to Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime, and seems to run different versions together. In the passages presented, Vandenabeele speaks of “affirmation of the will to life”, of the “aesthetic energy” afforded by the sublime to “rejoice in the bleak, horrific, and terrifying aspects of life”, and even to “justify” them. Vandenabeele also approves of the idea that humans need to “give our existence unassailable meaning”, and views the sublime as a way to do this by offering “the road towards finding a home in the world, providing a “profound feeling of *belonging*” via a felt connection with the sacred (Vandenabeele, 2015: 175). Each of these phrases can be read in the ways suggested above. Unfortunately, understanding affirmation in this broad sense—that is: as an umbrella term for A1-A3—may result in throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Though unorthodox, A1 has found varying levels of support from those who have taken Schopenhauer’s axiology and his commitment to monism to involve (or logically presuppose) a notion of the divine at the most fundamental level of reality (Mannion, 2003: 217, 2020: 401; Ellis, 2017; Shapshay, 2022). The difficulty for such interpretations, however, is that they appear to fly in the face of Schopenhauer’s professed pessimism—which involves the frequent and explicit *denial* of A1, and the defence of its *opposite*—as well as his corollary disapproval of the pantheism associated with Spinoza, and also Schiller, Fichte and Schelling (*PP 1*: 121; *PP 2*: §69).[[9]](#footnote-9) For this reason, I agree with Vandenabeele that Schopenhauer’s pessimistic characterisation of the world in terms of Nichtigkeit does preclude his affirmation in terms of A1.

Alternatively, A2 would have it that the sublime presents the evils of the world to us in a way which makes them bearable for the subject to behold. This view is representative of, or at least very close to, the Nietzschean project of affirmation evident in his published works. While there are important changes in the way he approaches this project from the early 1870’s through to the late 1880’s, Nietzsche consistently held that the value of art in particular is in its ability to induce life-affirming feeling in aesthetic experience, precisely via *illusion* and manipulating appearance.[[10]](#footnote-10) The problem with attributing this form of affirmation to Schopenhauer, however, is that his account of the sublime—and aesthetic experience generally—involves genuine epistemic value: the subject momentarily breaks through the “illusoriness” [*Scheinbarkeit*] and “ghostly phantasm [*luftgebilde*]” (*WWR 1*: 123) of everyday experience and gains metaphysical insight.

But it does not follow that either of these features of Schopenhauer’s thought—his pessimism or the epistemic value ascribed to the sublime—preclude A3, which construes ‘affirmation’ in terms of finding a *meaning* to life. It is worth noting that in a passage from 1851, Schopenhauer takes there to be a “moral significance” to the world (where, as the context of the passage suggests, ‘moral’ is used in a broad sense; perhaps closer to how contemporary philosophers might use the word ‘ethical’). Just after claiming that “Pantheism is by necessity optimism and therefore false”, he takes the thought that “the world has merely a physical but no moral significance” to be “the unholiest error, sprung from the greatest perversity of the mind” (*PP 2*, §69: 94). But isn’t this a flat contradiction if existence is assigned the property of Nichtigkeit?

This, of course, depends on how ‘meaning’ is to be understood in this context, and to what it is being ascribed. Contemporary thought on this topic has tended distinguish between the ‘meaning *of* life’—whereby existence ‘in itself’ or ‘as a whole’ has cosmic significance, or not—and ‘meaning *in* life’—whereby a person’s life exhibits meaning, or not. Another contemporary trend has it that meaningfulness for the latter is not equivalent to wellbeing. Thus, it could be that one is extremely satisfied in one’s pleasure-seeking existence, yet has a meaningless life (perhaps as is the case of a person plugged into Nozick’s ‘experience machine’), and conversely, one could have a deeply meaningful but miserable life. Yet meaning or meaningfulness is typically treated as a cluster concept denoting some or all of the following (non-exhaustive and often-interlacing) features: (i) a life-trajectory that merits admiration; (ii) transcendence above one’s desired-orientated perspective; (iii) fulfilment of higher-order purposes; (iv) having a significant impact on one’s society or culture; (v) fulfilment of a deity’s plan; (vi) the successful pursuit of highly creative endeavours. None of (i)-(vi) need be moral in nature.

There is plentiful evidence that Schopenhauer denies there is a ‘meaning *of* life’.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, there are, I believe, at least two kinds of meaningfulness that can be consistently attributed to a person’s life within the domain of Schopenhauer’s philosophy (which he too recognised), and that the sublime gives an approximation of: (1) meaningfulness in taking up an *appropriate practical stance* toward the world; (2) meaningfulness in a sense of *affiliation* with the world, and an impression of a mode of existence *beyond* or *above* mere striving to satisfy desires.

On my reading of Schopenhauer’s first conception of meaningfulness, the connection between his soteriology and aesthetics is of central importance. For Schopenhauer there are a variety of practical stances one *could* adopt towards a life characterised by Nichtigkeit: suicide, fear, egoism, hedonistic indulgence, and so forth. These stances all embody an epistemic defect insofar as they remain in empirical illusion that merely perpetuates the will. But what the sublime offers, as Julian Young phrases it, is “an introduction, an intimation of the solution to the problem of life” (Young, 1987: 100). This “riddle” [*Rätsel*] of existence, as Schopenhauer sometimes calls it, finds its genuine answer in the “highest moral goal” (*PP 2*, §157: 279): salvation [*Erlösung*]. What the sublime provides is a brief glimpse into what the ascetic saint experiences on a more sustained basis. Having attained salvation, the ascetic possesses “consciousness of the nothingness of all goods and the suffering of all life” (*WWR 1*: 423), and has succeeded in “breaking” or “taming” their will to transcend the illusion of their individuality. While saintly detachment is probably not achievable for everyone, sublime experience furnishes for the subject a flash of a possible mode of existence that goes beyond empirical reality, where suffering is abolished, and one is no longer deluded by or affected by the will-driven inclinations of embodied experience. While for Kant the sublime is a phenomenal approximation of acting in accordance with the moral law as dictated by reason, for Schopenhauer the sublime is a phenomenal approximation of ascetic resignation and denial of the will to life.[[12]](#footnote-12) In this way, the meaning that Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime offers is deeply *practical* in the way it can orientate one’s response to a hostile world: it initiates the subject into the taking up of an appropriate stance toward existence, or what Schopenhauer calls cultivating the “anti-cosmic tendency” (*WWR 2*: 615).

To conduct one’s life meaningfully then, is paradoxically to (1) *recognise* the futility and Nichtigkeit of the endless striving of everyday experience—“That [one] realises [that life is meaningless suffering] generally is [one’s] redemption” (*PP2*, §172a)—; (2) to *identify* with the most fundamental substratum of reality that all appearances ultimately manifest in essence; (3) *respond* to this enlightened epistemic position appropriately, which for Schopenhauer entails only resignation from life. The subject of the sublime satisfies (1)-(2) temporarily, while the ascetic saint does so in a prolonged state and achieves (3). Crucially, what this account of sublime experience demonstrates is that one does not have to arrive at (1) and (2) through abstract philosophical reflection, thereby providing an overly cognitive account that excludes aesthetic experience. Vandenabeele is right to resist this. What makes the sublime so powerful and recognisable, according to Schopenhauer, is precisely in the “*immediate* consciousness” (*WWR 1*: 230 - emphasis mine) of (1) and (2) that it affords, philosopher or not.

So far I have outlined how Schopenhauer sees meaningfulness in a particular disposition to act—i.e. a ‘stance’—that can result from enlightenment about the Nichtigkeit of existence (e.g. resignation in the hope for salvation). But what of the second type of meaning? The *Identification Thesis* holds that metaphysical insight into the fundamental unity of all things via the sublime is pleasurable insofar as we are raised above the pointless and repetitive striving of ordinary embodied existence. In affording the feeling of integration, kinship, and also of detachment from trivial concerns, the sublime acts as a stimulant against the alienation or malaise that, in Schopenhauer’s view, is an expected product of more cognitively complex forms of sentient life. For this reason, sublime objects—magnificent buildings, towering volcanoes, starry night skies, ancient forests—might be described as ‘sacred’ because they induce (at least temporarily) a pleasurable feeling of transcendence into a more eternal mode of existence; a glimpse into something *beyond* ordinary experience.

Contrary to a popular view concerning the value of sublime experience, this meaning-endowing potential gives us reason to believe that the sublime is not instrumentally good *merely* in virtue of its ability to provoke resignation (and ultimately salvation). That Schopenhauer takes the sublime to possess *that* ability is clearest in his estimation of tragedies, which he describes as inducing the “highest degree of [the sublime]’’ (*WWR 2*: 433). Schopenhauer takes tragedies to offer “significant intimation as to the nature [*Beschaffenheit*] of the world and of existence” (*WWR 1*: 280), and their vivid presentation of the human condition to undermine the subject’s trust in the value of life, revealing its Nichtigkeit. This is the beginning on a path that culminates in the saintly ascetic, for whom “when he views his own suffering as a mere example of the whole and…treats it as *one* case in a thousand…the whole of life, seen essentially as suffering, brings him to the point of resignation” (*WWR 1*: 423). But as I have suggested, there is also instrumental value in the meaning-conferring experience of elevation that the sublime affords us. The radical transformation of consciousness characteristic of the sublime has importance insofar as it speaks to “man’s need for metaphysics” (see *WWR 2*: §17): the deeply human yearning for existential significance. This is true even if there is *also* instrumental value in the practical effects of such experiences directing the subject towards negation of the will to life.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Consequently, when Vandenabeele writes that the sublime “is a high point in our demand that the world be meaningful to us, and our attempt to come to terms with its overwhelming and distressing aspects” (Vandenabeele, 2015: 128), he is correct. But it is also correct that Schopenhauer does more than just “hint” at *this* capacity: he has the conceptual resources to consistently declare it, even given a pessimistic framework. By exploiting the difference between value-affirmation and meaning-affirmation, and by characterising the latter in the ways given above, we can see that any concession that Schopenhauer’s pessimism precludes a form of sublime affirmation is misplaced. Schopenhauer’s pessimism does prevent him from affirming life, *if* what is meant by that is ‘finding life and the world to be good and justified’. But *the sacred*—a sense of an eternal nature beyond everyday utilitarian concerns—as well as *meaningful deliberation*—taking up an appropriate practical stance toward the world—is not precluded by Schopenhauer’s pessimism. On the contrary, he is explicit that this is one of the profound insights of Christianity which, like all good pessimistic religions, is an allegorical expression of a truth Schopenhauer claims to demonstrate philosophically: the world is a vale of tears from which we must hope to be saved. Redemption from the cycle of vain struggles to satisfy our desires is in renunciation; a metaphysical insight about our existential condition afforded by the sublime.

**Conclusion**

It is often claimed that atheism precludes the possibility of what is perhaps a fundamental feature of the human experience: humbling reverence for something higher or more fundamental than one’s own concerns (be they self-interested or other-regarding). But one interesting implication of the view defended up to this point is how Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime can find functional parallels with religious accounts of the sacred, thus throwing this claim into question. Many theories of the sublime have been explicitly religious, be that through holding religious *ideas* or *concepts* to be themselves sublime (e.g. God’s infinite power, intellect, or love); religious *works* designed to venerate God or his glory (e.g. grand cathedrals, statues, iconography); religious *practices* (e.g. rituals and congregations, martyrdom and sacrifice); or through interpreting natural objects as sublime qua products of God’s creation (e.g. mountains, great lakes, deep forests). The latter view, for example, was explicitly held by Shaftesbury:

All Nature’s Wonders serve to excite and perfect this Idea of their *Author*. ‘Tis here he suffers us to see, and even converse with him, in a manner to our Frailty. How glorious is it to contemplate him, in this noblest of his Works apparent to us, The System of the bigger World (Shaftesbury, 1773, Part III: 370)

What makes Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime and the ‘sacred’ uniquely interesting is not so much his atheism *per se*; secular accounts of the sublime were already offered by the likes of Burke, Kant, Schiller, and others. Rather, it is his unrelenting pessimism which characterises existence as *nightmarish*. Even those who go further than simply denying the inherent goodness of the world as a creation of benevolent deity, and see existence only in terms of Nichtigkeit and suffering, can experience a sense of the sacred, and find meaning in living in a Godless and hostile world.

On this point I agree with Vandenabeele, who writes that “[e]ven though aesthetic experience is not to be identified with religious experience, some (intense) aesthetic experiences, especially those that we tend to characterise as sublime, are often hard to distinguish from religious ones” (Vandenabeele, 2015: 173). One of the great insights which pervades Schopenhauer’s texts is the recognition of the deeply human need to find some significance to our existence beyond the characteristic strivings of everyday experience. It is this which traditional religious narratives at least promise in a highly evocative and vivid manner, even if (according to Schopenhauer) the veracity of such narratives are only ever allegorical in nature. Sublime experiences—as temporary moments of elevation beyond everyday concerns—speak to this need, and for that reason seem remarkably similar to the experience of objects, locations, rituals, and congregations which tend to be identified with the sacred. For this reason, Vandenabeele is right to regard Schopenhauer’s position as “quasi-religious” insofar as it involves a radical transformation of consciousness: we transcend our everyday concerns and emotions orientated by our will, and go beyond the ordinary suffering-ridden experience of the illusory empirical world.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is this practical-existential feature of the sublime which makes Schopenhauer of potential rejuvenated interest for a contemporary culture that has largely outgrown its theistic commitments, but not the need for meaning and metaphysical significance.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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1. Julian Young identifies a third category of the sublime in Schopenhauer, namely: the feeling of “total indifference of nature to oneself” (Young, 2005: 118) that is produced by solitude in nature. While I am sympathetic to this claim, it need not be pursued here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As will shortly become clear, though I am generally sympathetic to Bart Vandenabeele’s (2015) critique of Shapshay’s interpretation, in places he overstates the case and tends to overlook Shapshay’s acknowledgement of this very point. As she writes: “In contrast with Kant’s account, which makes use of our theoretical-rational vocation as a source of our prideful elevation, on Schopenhauer’s account the subject’s limitations are construed more existentially than cognitively: encounters with vast nature instil in us a sense of our smallness and existential insignificance. Our frustration does not arise, as it does on Kant’s account, from our inability to grasp the totality of the representations. Instead, for Schopenhauer, we are reduced to Nichts by the sheer vastness (in space and time) of the universe” (Shapshay, 2012: 497). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Another interesting implication is that the pleasures inherent to the *Achieved Autonomy Thesis* and the *Identification Thesis* do not *obviously* look to be ‘negative’ (i.e. pleasures in the cessation of striving), which would somewhat complicate Schopenhauer’s official view about the nature of pleasure (see *WWR 1*: §58). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Shapshay recognises, Schopenhauer’s account of freedom has nothing to do with the power of reason which, for Kant, grounds the moral law. Instead, Schopenhauer takes the ability to detach from inclination—like the ability to act compassionately rather than egoistically, and the capacity for ascetic resignation—as a deeply mysterious process of identifying the thing in itself as will. See Shapshay, (2012: 501). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Further evidence for the absence of any moral component might be found in comparing the striking similarities between the “sublime character” (*WWR 1*, §39: 231) and the ascetic saint (*WWR 1*, §68: 417); both of whom achieve an objective detachment from their desires (but for different periods of time). Importantly, the transcending of the will includes transcending altruistic desires, which precludes Schopenhauer’s conception of virtue in terms of compassion. The philosophical import of this comparison then, is that not only does the sublime have no necessary moral significance for Schopenhauer, but sublime experience might ultimately be *inimical* to morality as he conceives of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.F.J. Payne translates Nichtigkeit as “vanity” (in the sense of something being done in vain). Both “vanity” and “nothingness” are adequate in accounting for the futility of existence as Schopenhauer conceives it. But I shall maintain the German, partly to emphasise how it uniquely functions in Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For attention to this view and Schopenhauer’s arguments for it, see Janaway, (1999); Hassan, (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Vandenabeele also states that Schopenhauer’s “hints” are developed by Nietzsche; a claim he explores in greater detail in Vandenabeele, (2003). While there are parallels between the two thinkers on the issue, I am sceptical as to whether they are significant enough to overshadow the many important differences in their philosophical projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A possible way out of this would be to deny Schopenhauer’s pessimism, or at least restrict it in some degree to an earlier period of his writing. The latter strategy is explored and defended by Shapshay (2019). For criticism of this view, see Hassan (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For an account of how aesthetic experience plays this life-affirming role in Nietzsche, and specifically its implications for the value of suffering, see Hassan (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. However, this is sometimes complicated by the ambiguity of certain passages, e.g. *PP 2*, §69: 94 quoted above). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. To be clear, Schopenhauer often suggests aesthetic experience more broadly is a phenomenal approximation of ascetic resignation (see *WWR 1*, §68). Thus, while I don’t understand the sublime to be *uniquely* capable of this approximation, I take it to be the most developed and forceful instance of it, unlike the nascent manner in which the beautiful approximates denial of the will. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This view is also consistent with interpreting Schopenhauer to hold a view (not endorsed here) according to which the sublime is a form of cognition, states of which are *intrinsically* valuable. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Incidentally, it was precisely Schopenhauer’s capacity to retain this sense of meaning—while rejecting the metaphysical baggage of theism yet also avoiding the pitfalls of materialism—which attracted his first ‘disciple’, Julius Frauenstädt, a convert from Judaism to Christianity. See Frauenstädt (1848). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I am grateful to Tim Stoll for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)