

Book Review

AAGAARD-MOGENSEN, LARS (editor). *The Possibility of the Sublime: Aesthetic Exchanges*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 126 pp., £58.99.

Lars Aagaard-Mogensen's recent book, *The Possibility of the Sublime*, takes as its subject a particularly eye-catching and bold claim that challenges the growing enthusiasm in the contemporary literature for postmodern and Kantian accounts of the sublime: In 'Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?', Jane Forsey argues that a theory of the sublime is *not possible* in response to Guy Sircello's positive thesis.¹ As is highlighted in the author-meets-critics layout of Aagaard-Mogensen's book, this view attracts several critics. The first chapter is a reprint of Forsey's contentious 2007 essay, which is followed by six chapters, each of which written by a philosopher who argues that a theory of the sublime *is* possible. The book closes with Forsey's replies to these commentators (entitled 'The Sublime, Redux').

Forsey essentially argues that a theory of the sublime is not possible because no single theory can avoid or resolve all three of the following challenges: 1) the transcendence paradox, 2) distinguishing the sublime from other aesthetic experiences, such as beauty, and 3) the paradox of negative emotion. This reasoning is reflected in both Forsey's discussion of Sircello and Malcolm Budd's sublime (in her 2007 essay) and her responses to critics in 'The Sublime, Redux.'

Forsey's first challenge to theorists of the sublime—the transcendence paradox—comes from Sircello's essay, where he discusses the problems with the view that "An experience of the

¹ Guy Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993), pp.541-550 and Jane Forsey, "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007), pp.381-389.

sublime presents the object of the experience, i.e., the sublime, as epistemologically inaccessible” and, further, the “experience of the sublime” denotes an experience of an object.² This leads to an incoherence tantamount to having a visual experience of an invisible object; the experience represents this object as existing, yet it is *completely* inaccessible to our cognitive powers, something “on a level of being...which transcends that of humankind and all of humankind’s possible environments.”³ How can we have and describe an experience that presents an object that is in no way epistemologically accessible, an existent object that is inaccessible to our modes of experiencing? Furthermore, descriptions of sublime experience that avoid this incoherence fall into contradiction instead. When we describe towering mountains or stormy seas as sublime objects, we treat these objects simultaneously as transcendent (in identifying them as sublime) and as familiar, as accessible to thought (in being able to describe them).

To avoid the transcendence paradox, theorists such as Sircello and Budd consider or provide purely epistemological accounts which focus on the subject’s experience of cognitive failure rather than on the troublesome object of the sublime. For example, Budd drops the problematic aspect of moral transcendence (Kant’s view that the sublime experience reveals the transcendent self as moral legislator) and instead describes the sublime as involving the subject’s realization of her limitations, vulnerability, or insignificance, and this realization bringing with it a certain pleasure after the initial shock. But, according to Forsey, Budd’s account faces her other two challenges due to this exclusion of moral transcendence.

Though the general structure of Budd’s sublime—i.e., displeasure leading to pleasure—is, to Forsey, a necessary component for capturing what is distinct about this experience, she explains that his account does not adequately distinguish the sublime from many other experiences; it is far too inclusive. For example, feeling one’s own limitations in trying (and failing) to solve a difficult *New York Times* crossword puzzle falls within Budd’s account. Further, since Budd focuses only on the subject’s cognitive limitations, his theory could not

² Forsey (2017) pp.2-3 / Sircello (1993) p.545.

³ Forsey (2017) p.4 / Sircello (1993) p.545.

include examples of Kant's dynamic sublime. The latter are experiences of the subject's physical vulnerability in response to objects that *can* be cognized, such as towering mountains.

For Forsey, the challenge of distinguishing the sublime from other experiences is wrapped into her third and most formidable challenge: the paradox of negative emotion. She explains, "what is supposed to make the sublime distinct is that we can be moved to pleasure by what should not please us in its contra-purposiveness, and it is this that is so difficult to explain."⁴ Accordingly, she asks of Budd's account and most of the commentaries in Aagaard-Mogensen's book: why does the awareness of one's limitations (cognitive or otherwise) lead to pleasure? Why does it not lead to frustration, humiliation, or determination to overcome failure? Forsey indicates that there are only two ways out of the paradox, both of which are unappealing: either hold that the sublime is an aesthetic experience that contains no pleasurable aspect (which goes against common intuitions), or keep Kantian moral transcendence in the experience (in which case we run up against the transcendence paradox). According to Forsey, no aesthetician has adequately resolved this paradox.

I have two criticisms of Forsey's essays, both of which are supported by Tom Hanauer and Sandra Shapshay (two commentators in the book). The first is highlighted in Hanauer and Shapshay's responses to Forsey and has been intimated in much of my discussion above: while Hanauer and Shapshay note the importance of stating clearly the criteria for an adequate theory of the sublime (and explicitly propose and defend some criteria of their own), it is unclear whether Forsey's criteria, which are scattered throughout her two essays, form an exhaustive list. Being clear about (and defending) what counts as an adequate account is crucial in determining what routes are available to theorists in navigating through Forsey's three challenges and, ultimately, whether an adequate theory of the sublime is possible. For instance, Hanauer offers a way to resolve the transcendence paradox, claiming that oftentimes we have *partial* epistemic access to a sublime object—the object is obscure rather than totally inaccessible. This solution works for Hanauer because he argues that an adequate theory need

⁴ Forsey (2017) p.100.

not account for the type of epistemological transcendence with which Forsey is concerned—where the object, such as God, is completely epistemologically inaccessible—as it is not an essential or core part of sublimity. While Forsey notes that Hanauer’s view about partial epistemic access has limitations (it does not provide a way to distinguish the sublime from other aesthetic experiences nor to resolve the paradox of negative emotion), she does not comment on nor give us reason to reject his argument about what is not required of an adequate theory. If we can adopt Hanauer’s latter view, this opens new pathways toward an adequate theory of the sublime. At the very least, Hanauer and Shapshay highlight this critical task which is not sufficiently addressed by Forsey.

The second criticism is that even though no theorist to date has developed a theory that avoids or resolves all three of Forsey’s challenges, this fact does not entail that the task is logically impossible. Hanauer makes this point after explaining that the paradox of negative emotion 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.”⁵ Despite the little ground Forsey explicitly concedes in her reply to critics (namely, her use of epistemic terms in her interpretation of Kant’s sublime), readers come across less-confident language at important junctures in this second essay compared to her first. For example, she says “we aestheticians have *not yet* adequately resolved”⁶ the negative emotion paradox, and that she is “certainly open to [more] suggestions” to resolve it;⁷ she concludes that “we appear forced” to go down old and problematic routes in trying to distinguish between beauty and the sublime; and that, overall, “I have tried to...more clearly articulate the ways in which the sublime remains problematic, or seems so to me.”⁸

This change in Forsey’s tone is warranted. Shapshay, for example, challenges two of Forsey’s rather restrictive (and related) views: 1) Forsey suggests that the *only* adequate explanation for the pleasurable aspect of the sublime is the moment of Kantian moral

⁵ Hanauer (2017) p.42.

⁶ Forsey (2017) p.94 (my emphasis).

⁷ Forsey (2017) p.95.

⁸ Forsey (2017) p.104.

transcendence and 2) one cannot resolve the negative emotion paradox by claiming that there are *two* objects in the sublime experience (one that elicits fear or pain and one that elicits pleasure), as it will necessarily include a moment of transcendence (which leads back to the transcendence paradox). Shapshay's discussion of Donovan Webster's sublime experience of exploring a volcano highlights two different objects within the experience—neither of which involve a moment of transcendence—and explains the pleasurable aspects of the sublime. As Webster lowers himself down into the volcano, he feels fear or terror towards aspects of the environment that remind him that one slip of the rope would lead to his death (e.g., the acidic gases biting his nose and eyes or knowledge that the lava is 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit). At the same time, he feels exhilarating pleasure in attending aesthetically to the deep orangey red light and “pumpkin sized globs of ejected lava”—things he describes as “stupefyingly beautiful.”⁹ Considering this example together with Hanauer's views about adequate theories of the sublime and obscure objects provide some new plausible ways to navigate through Forsey's three challenges.

This all suggests that what this book offers—by its end—is not a robust argument for the impossibility of a theory of the sublime but, rather, a rich and thought-provoking discussion about the challenges facing extant accounts and suggests some ways to move forward: things of importance and interest to contemporary theorists of the sublime.

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⁹ Shapshay (2017) p.73.