Incommensurable, Supersensible, Sublime

by Jeffrey Wilson

The sublime (*das Erhabene*) in Kant is a feeling that elevates (*erhebt*)[1] the soul and results in an aesthetic judgment. While aesthetic judgments of beauty involve a feeling of pure pleasure (*Lust*), aesthetic judgments of the sublime rest on a feeling of pleasure and displeasure (*Lust und Unlust*) at the same moment. Kant describes the sublime at one point rather paradoxically as involving a "negative pleasure" (*Critique of Judgment*, Ak. V: 245).[2] The feeling of the sublime is brought about by experiences where one has a sense of the infinity (*Unendlichkeit*) of nature. This sense of infinity can be brought about by the sheer size (*Größe*) of an object. Kant would call this a feeling of the *mathematically* sublime. A mountain so large that one cannot take it in at a single glance causes a feeling of the mathematically sublime. One gets a different sense of the infinity of

[1]Kant's deliberate connection of the noun for the sublime (*das Erhabene*) to the verb "to uplift" (*erheben*) is apparent at CJ, Ak. V: 269, where Kant writes about "[t]his reflection of aesthetic judgment to lift itself up [*sich erheben*] to commensurability with reason ..." (trans. mine). *Erheben* can also appear in contexts where it means "to lift up one's eyes," "to praise," or "to ennoble." Determining the role that judgments of the sublime play in Kant's philosophy of action is equivalent to making the transition from a literal to a figurative meaning of *erheben*: one tries to answer the question, How does this uplifting feeling also ennoble us?

[2]I follow the custom of Kant scholars in referring to Kant's works by the volume number and pagination of the standard German edition: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin, 1902–1938). Vol. 23 ed. by Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR (Berlin, 1956). From vol. 24 ed. by Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, 1966– [not yet complete]. With the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is referred to by the numbers of the First (A) and Second (B) Editions respectively, these so-called "Akademie" page numbers are standard in all translations of Kant. All translations from the German in the present paper, whether of primary or of secondary sources, are my own.

beautiful carries with it a *direct* feeling of the promotion of life (CJ, Ak. V: 244), but the sublime does this *indirectly*, through "a momentary suppression of life forces [*Lebenskräfte*] and a pouring out of them immediately afterwards that is that much stronger" (CJ, Ak. V: 245). This is only a phenomenological description of the relation of the sublime to the feeling of life, not yet an explanation of how it functions. Nevertheless, by filling the definition of life into the description, one arrives at the result that the sublime involves a momentary suppression of the forces of the capacity to act according to the power of desire, followed by a more powerful pouring out of these forces. This entails that the sublime first undermines, then strengthens one's sense of oneself as an agent.

In the remainder of this paper, I will address Kant's treatment of the sublime in three stages. The final stage will be to spell out the implications of the sublime for Kant's philosophy of action, in connection with pleasure and displeasure and the feeling of life. In preparation for considering action in the sublime, I will explain how presentation (*Darstellung*) functions in the Analytic of the Sublime. As a first task, however, I examine a constellation of related terms Kant uses about the sublime that all have to do with measurement. How these terms contribute to an understanding of presentation and action will become clear as the exposition unfolds. Before turning to an examination of the language of measure and incommensurability in Kant's Analytic of the Sublime, it will be helpful to orient my account in relation to those of several other interpreters.

I.

Literature on the Sublime. One of the most careful and extended accounts of Kant's treatment of the sublime occurs in Paul Crowther's *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art*.[4] The present paper is aimed chiefly at correcting several errors of commission and omission in Crowther's work. Crowther gives no extended analysis, for example, of what it means for Kant to say that the sublime is a negative presentation (*negative Darstellung*, CJ, Ak. V: 274) of our moral vocation. I attempt here at least to make intuitive sense of what Kant might mean by this expression. Further, while Crowther does comment on the notion of schematizing without a concept, which comes to be an issue in the sublime, and argues for the centrality of

[4]Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

Section 59 ("On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality"), he does not attempt any general account of the role of presentation or of the relation between schematization and symbolization as regards the sublime.

Crowther's lack of such an account of presentation puts him in what turns out to be an amusing predicament when he offers his own purported revisions to Kant's theory of sublimity. After giving what I will argue is a misrepresentation of the relation between sublimity and morality and criticizing Kant for linking them too closely, Crowther proposes that we view the experience of the sublime as grounded in a "felt harmony between the sensible world and our cognitive capacities or creative abilities."[5] I take Crowther's proffered revision of Kant to be, in fact, an accurate characterization of Kant's own theory, especially after one has made a careful analysis of how presentation functions in it. Such an analysis will show that Kant's analysis does not rely on moral presuppositions but instead contributes to a philosophy of action, and already contains the indirectness of a relation of harmony between the sensible world and our cognitive capacities that Crowther would like to add to it to make it philosophically sound.

One of the more useful aspects of Crowther's work is his discussion of the roots of Kant's theory of sublimity in Addison and Burke. Crowther argues that Kant goes beyond their work by recasting the sublime as an essentially moral concept. Crowther's exposition is, however, least satisfying precisely on the point of the moral importance of the sublime for Kant. Although he does at times seem to recognize the problem of the possible phenomenal efficacy of the noumenal will, Crowther's comments on the feeling of respect seem to circumvent the problem altogether, insofar as he claims that our supersensible being "is able to bring about changes in the phenomenal world ... solely on the basis of its own principles."[6] In fact, Kant never considers himself justified in making such a claim determinatively, which would seem to be a denial of the mechanism of nature. We are able to consider nature reflectively as a field of moral activity and the effects of this activity, but this never amounts to more than a subjective sense of the possible *harmony* of nature with moral purposes. Crowther is therefore particularly misguided in his assertion that Kant founds his justification of sublimity on assumptions about our supersensible moral being and their efficacy. The sublime does force us to reflect on the possibility of such effi-

[5]Ibid., 166.
[6]Ibid., 28.

cacy, but that is an *implication* of the sublime for action, not an assumption of moral principles within it, as I will demonstrate.

Apart from Crowther, my discussion here takes place in conversation primarily with Jane Kneller,[7] Ralf Meerbote,[8] and Rudolf Makkreel.[9] Whereas Kneller views the sublime as "predicated on the failure of the imagination to bridge the gap between sensibility and theoretical or practical reason,"[10] I find that she does not attend to the subjective support given to the idea of the highest good by the feeling of sublimity. I argue that, by forcing us to reflect on our supersensible vocation, the sublime encourages in us a sense that we possess a causality that is not restricted to the conditions of sensibility. This would make the sublime a presentation (albeit a negative one) of the highest good, by presenting the idea that virtue produces happiness by a causality above that of sense.

I see this paper as extending aspects of Meerbote's and Makkreel's work. Both these interpreters give sensitive renderings of the process of aesthetic estimation and its role in the mathematical sublime,[11] but without calling particular attention to the pervasiveness of Kant's language of measurement and commensurability, as I do here. Furthermore, I build on Makkreel's analysis of the meaning of the "feeling of life" in Kant to make a more precise and nuanced connection of the sublime to action than previous interpreters have made.

II.

Measure and Incommensurability. The *Critique of Judgment* introduces a new concept to the consideration of nature, over and above the categories of

[7]See "Imagination and the Possibility of Moral Reform in the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,'" in *Akten des 7. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, ed. Gerhard Funke, vol. II.1 (Bonn: Bouvier, 1990), 665–76.

[8]See "Kant's Views on the Mathematical Sublime," in *Akten des 7. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, 691–704.

[9]See "Imagination and Temporality in Kant's Theory of the Sublime," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1984): 305–35; as well as "The Feeling of Life: Some Kantian Sources of Life-Philosophy," *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Geisteswissenschaften* 3 (1985): 83–104; and *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[10]"Imagination and the Possibility of Moral Reform," 672.

[11]See Makkreel *Imagination and Intrepretation in Kant*, 68–72 and Meerbote, "Kant's Views on the Mathematical Sublime," 693–95.

understanding given in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This new concept is purposiveness, which Kant examines from both aesthetic and teleological angles. The attribution of purposiveness to nature in aesthetic judgments of beauty produces an unmediated connection of judgment with the capacity for pleasure and displeasure (*Lust und Unlust*). In so doing, purposiveness reveals itself as "a principle of the commensurability [*Angemessenheit*] of nature to our cognitive power" (CJ, Ak. V: 188). Commensurability is originally a mathematical term, cognate with the German verb *messen*, "to measure"; it always carries with it the implication of a *Maß*, or standard of measurement.[12]

What mathematical constructions do is present (*darstellen*) intuitions that are commensurate (*angemessen*) with their concepts. This is a schematic process: in construction, imagination employs a schema that is a rule for the production of figures in pure space which are commensurate with the concepts they construct. The schematization of categories (pure concepts of the understanding) is similar, except that the schema is a rule of time determination (*Zeitbestimmung*); it is not space but time that is the pivotal form of intuition involved in the presentation (*Darstellung*) of categories. Categories become "commensurate" with the intuitions that present them by means of a nexus of relations in time.

In the "Typic of Pure Practical Judgment" in the second *Critique*, the only common measure between the moral law and the law of nature that is its presentation (*Darstellung*) is the form of law as such, and the imagination is excluded from this process. When Kant declares, in Section 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*, that beauty is a symbol of morality, his explanation of symbolization there makes clear that the intuition of a beautiful object becomes "commensurate" with the morally good only by means of a common rule of reflection on each. There is not even a common form (as in the

[12]Werner Pluhar has translated *angemessen* and *Unangemessenheit* as "adequately" and "inadequacy" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated, with an Introduction, by Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987]; see, for example, p. 226 of his translation). Unfortunately, this obscures the different shades of meaning among *angemessen*, *adäquat*, and a number of words such as *unfähig*, *unzulänglich*, and *unzureichend*, all of which Kant uses in various settings to indicate inadequacy. More importantly, though, his translation completely effaces the connection of *angemessen* and *Unangemessenheit* with the discussions of measure and the need for a standard (*Maß*) for the estimation of magnitudes in the treatment of the mathematical sublime.

Ideal of Beauty when he mentions possible empirical standard measures "such as the middle size of the human beings known to us, animals of a certain species, trees, houses, mountains, and the like" (CJ, Ak. V: 249). What such a "foundational unit" (*zum Grunde liegende Maßstab,* V: 249) allows is not just a comparative estimation of how large a given quantity is but a reflective judgment that an object is "simply large [*schlechtweg ... Groß*]" (V: 248). It allows us to say that a dog or a house or a man is large without carrying out an actual measurement.

The foundational unit (or what might roughly be called the "yardstick") can come either from empirical sources, like the average of all the houses I have seen in my life, or from a priori sources, like the degree of a certain virtue. In both the empirical and the a priori case, we have a *subjective* unit of measurement; even though the idea of a specific virtue is an a priori idea, we only use the idea within the constraints of the imagination's ability to present this idea concretely. Aesthetic estimation allows us to recognize that the degree of virtue to be seen in a certain person is large, not comparing the person's actions or character to the objective standard of the moral law (which, as an idea of reason, cannot be schematized and thus cannot be brought into an intuition that could be used for comparison), but to a *subjective* standard of the greatest virtue that our limited powers of presentation *in concreto* allow us to imagine.[15]

For example, although we might not be able to imagine a person whose generosity is so unselfish that she completely refrains from taking her own needs into account, we can imagine a person who is so generous that she almost never does so. This subjective maximum of our power to imagine a virtuous person can serve as a yardstick for the estimation of any degree of virtue that is less than the one our yardstick displays and for declaring any example of virtue that comes close to it to be "simply large." Thus, even the aesthetic estimation of magnitudes, which is only a stepping-stone between comparative estimation and judgments of the mathematically sublime, already contributes to a philosophy of action by assisting in the (reflective) application of the moral idea of virtue to concrete instances. Kant thus suggests in this passage that the principle of the aesthetic estimation of a magnitude can have an important *moral* application.

[15]This latter point is my interpretive amplification of the following passage: "... or an a priori given standard, which through the shortcomings of the judging subject is limited to the subjective conditions of presentation in concreto" (CJ, Ak. V: 249, trans. mine).

Although the aesthetic estimation of magnitudes involves *reflective judgment* and, at least in the case of the estimation of the magnitude of virtues, a foundational unit that springs from an *a priori* source, such judgments are not yet *transcendental* aesthetic judgments, since they do not involve purposiveness as judgment's own principle.[16] This occurs in judgments of beauty and, once again, in judgments of mathematical sublimity, where an object is judged to be "absolutely, from every point of view (beyond all comparison) large" (CJ, Ak. V: 250). And, to express this point directly in terms of measuring and commensurability, Kant writes, "we permit no standard [*Maßstab*] for this thing that is commensurate [*angemessen*] with it to be sought outside of it, but only in it. It is a quantity that is only equal to itself" (CJ, Ak. V: 250).

We encounter nothing in nature, however, that is sublime in this sense. Everything sensible can be divided into ever smaller parts or made to seem small in comparison to something much larger; microscopes and telescopes give ample experience of this. Nevertheless, the human *imagination* has a tendency to strive for a progress into the infinite in its representations. *Reason*, by contrast, insists on the comprehension of a whole as an absolute totality (CJ, Ak. V: 250). Kant's thought in this passage seems to be that an object occasions a feeling of the sublime when it leads the imagination down the road of attempting to present infinity in intuition and when reason, at the same time, asserts its claim for the grasping of a whole, whether intuitively represented or merely thought, as a totality.

Imagination can, in fact, continue *ad indefinitum* in representing, for example, the addition of one unit to another, but it cannot ever complete the infinite series or meet reason's demand for the comprehension of the resulting presentation as a totality. Imagination and reason are thus brought into a conflict that is uplifting: "just this incommensurability [*Unangemessenheit*] of our capacity for the estimation of the magnitude of things in the sensible world is the awakening [*Erweckung*][17] of the feeling of a supersensible capacity in us" (CJ, Ak. V: 250). The inability of imagination to give a unit of measure (a *Maß*) to an encountered object that would allow its presentation according to the idea of a whole (V: 252) produces a feeling of the presence of reason and its demand for totality in us. It is this mental

[16]In the case of virtues, judgment would be using an a priori standard drawn from another mental capacity, namely, reason.

[17]or "quickening."

attunement (*Geistesstimmung*[18]), not any sensible object, that must be called sublime (V: 250). This leads to a further definition of the mathematical sublime in terms of units of measure: "*Sublime is what even to be able to think it proves a capacity of the mind that outstrips every unit of measure* [Maßstab] *of the senses*" (CJ, Ak. V: 250, Kant's emphasis).

Kant intends this definition in two senses at once. His first meaning is that there is no standard unit of measure available for imagination to use to measure an object in the case of the sublime. His second meaning is that imagination does have a certain aesthetic maximum unit of measure (an *absolutes Maß* or *ästhetisch-größtes Grundmaß*, V: 251 and 252) that is the limit of its ability to present magnitudes concretely, and the object that occasions a feeling of the sublime outstrips this "aesthetically-largest basic unit of measure." The mathematically sublime contributes to moral action by an "expansion of the mind, which feels itself capable of overstepping the limitations [*Schranken*] of sensibility from a ... practical point of view" (CJ, Ak. V: 255). This is, of course, not to say that the mind feels itself capable of overstepping the bounds of possible experience, since in that case, the feeling of the sublime would not be an expansion of the mind in the interest of practical reason but a fall into metaphysical delusion and fanaticism.

Although the mathematical sublime concerns quantity and the dynamical sublime concerns quality (specifically the quality of might, *Macht*), the language of measurement only diminishes but does not disappear when Kant turns from one to the other. Viewing nature in certain objects as a "power that [nevertheless] has no power over us" (CJ, Ak. V: 260)

> raises our strength of soul above its normal mediocrity [literally "middle measure"—*Mittelmaß*] and lets us discover in ourselves a capacity of resistance of an entirely different kind; this capacity gives us the courage to be able to measure [*messen*] ourselves with the apparent omnipotence of nature. (CJ, Ak. V: 261)

The verb *messen* here has a double meaning, one literal, one figurative. Literally, *uns ... messen* means "to measure ourselves," but read as a reflexive verb *sich messen mit* can mean "to rival" or, to use an archaic expression that

[18] *Geistesstimmung* is another term with musical resonances, since *Stimmung* is a particular way of tuning a musical instrument. However, the term does not necessarily refer to a pleasant or correct attunement; either an instrument or a person can be in poor *Stimmung*.

captures the meaning best, "to count oneself equal to." On the one hand, the dynamical sublime forces us to measure ourselves by the "yardstick" of nature's might and to discover that it can destroy us, insofar as we view ourselves as merely natural (sensible) beings. This would by itself be cause for anxiety and humiliation. On the other hand, the dynamical sublime encourages us to *rival* nature—that is to say, to resist its apparent power over us—by a recognition that we are not merely sensible beings but also rational beings, and thus to "count ourselves equal to" nature, indeed superior to it by means of moral reason. As beings of sense, we must regard nature's power as immeasurable (*unermeßlich*), but as beings of reason, we have a non-sensible measuring rod (*nicht-sinnlichen Maßstab*) of reason which even has at its disposal infinity as a unit of measurement (CJ, Ak. V: 261). This non-sensible measuring rod is our supersensible vocation[19] (CJ, Ak. V: 268), the determination of reason to act according to the moral law, which gives us a superiority (*Überlegenheit*) over nature (CJ, Ak. V: 261). And although imagination proves itself objectively incommensurable (*unangemessen*) with reason's idea of totality, judgment in its reflection on the sublime does "lift itself [*sich ... erheben*] to a commensurability [*Angemessenheit*] with reason (albeit without a determinate concept of reason)" (CJ, Ak. V: 269). Thus, while in the case of beauty, reflective judgment mediates a harmony between imagination and understanding, in the case of the sublime, *judgment itself* becomes reflectively commensurate with reason.

III.

The Sublime as a Negative Presentation. What is the mechanism, in the sublime, of the *commensuration* of judgment with reason? Kant spells out the essential structure of this commensuration in the language of presentation (*Darstellung*). I noted in the introduction to this paper that the liking involved in both the beautiful and the sublime is tied to "the mere presentation or capacity for presentation," and that the imagination here is working,

[19]Kant uses the same word, *Bestimmung*, to designate moral vocation as he does for the determination that goes on in determinative judgments (see Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 79, n. 10). In the case of our supersensible moral vocation, however, it is not the determination of an object that is at issue but self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*), a determination of the will to act according to the moral law. The object of this moral determination, the highest good, remains an idea that can be given reality only reflectively, not determinatively.

to be sure, not at the behest of understanding or reason, but nevertheless for the benefit and in promotion of understanding or reason, through an agreement of imagination with one of those higher cognitive[20] capacities. The beautiful presents an indeterminate concept of understanding, while the sublime presents an indeterminate concept of reason (CJ, Ak. V: 244).

The sublime's presentation of this indeterminate concept of reason is, however, highly problematic; Kant will ultimately characterize it as a *negative* presentation. One of the first aspects of the feeling of the sublime which Kant draws the reader's attention to is that it arises in the face of an object whose formlessness is incommensurate with, and even does violence to, our capacity for presentation (*Darstellungsvermögen*) (CJ, Ak. V: 245). Indeed, for this reason, it cannot be said that any *object* is suited to the presentation of sublimity; instead, what is sublime is a state of mind brought about by reflection on the object, and this is a state of mind in which *ideas of reason* are implicated. Being faced with formlessness reminds us that ideas of reason can be given no commensurate presentation, but Kant's claim is that we find, in the sublime, a presentation of precisely this *incommensurability* (CJ, Ak. V: 245).

In the case of the mathematical sublime, it is the inability of imagination to present totality that presents incommensurability to us:

> For here there is a feeling of the incommensurability of one's imagination to present [*darzustellen*] the idea of a whole, where the imagination reaches its maximum and, in striving to expand it, sinks back into itself, but by this means it is transposed into an agitating [*rührendes*] liking. (CJ, Ak. V: 252)

Imagination moves outward, stretching to its limit, then returns to itself. It does not, however, sink back into itself in its original state. The movement outward and back leaves its mark in the form of a transposition into a new state, as if into a new musical key.[21] It is the *entire movement* of the imagina-

[20]By "cognition" is meant here not the contemporary meaning of this term but Kant's term *Erkenntnis*. The powers of cognition include for him understanding, reason, and judgment (see the table at CJ, Ak. V: 198).

[21]Indeed, I have translated *versetzen* here as "transpose" because of a prevalence of musical terms in the *Critique of Judgment*. For example, virtually all of Kant's terms for agreement and harmony have musical resonances: *Einklang*, "a single sound"; *Einstimmung*, "singing with one voice"; *Übereinstimmung*, "a harmony or agreement of voices," etc. *Bestimmung*,

tion's departure from its "middle measure" or mediocrity (*Mittelmaß*) (CJ, Ak. V: 261)—its striving toward infinity or totality and reaching, instead, the limit of its capacity, and its transposed return—that *presents* incommensurability and excites the feeling of sublimity. The shape of the mathematical sublime is thus a microcosm of the traditional spiritual journey of departure and return.

The fact that the presentation involved in the feeling of the sublime is thus essentially kinetic (Greek *kinēsis*, movement) sets it off from such first *Critique* forms of presentation as constructions and categorial schemata. When the imagination *constructs* a geometrical concept, it produces a rule of the spatial determination of figures, but what results is a static form. To *schematize* a transcendental category, imagination performs relatively simple time determinations involving coexistence and succession.[22] Because it describes a movement, however, the presentation functioning in the *mathematical sublime* makes a greater claim on the power of imagination by forcing it to present a kinetic[23] form, and not just *any* kinetic form but one that includes the very limit of the imagination of forms as one of its moments. Constructing and schematizing are the normal activities of imagination, belonging, as it were, to its mediocrity (*Mittelmaß*), while the sublime is a challenge to the imagination to outstrip itself and stretch to its outermost limits.

The object that occasions the feeling of the sublime is the cause only of imagination's initial departure from its normal activities. Without the inter-

Kant's term for both determination and vocation, has the sense of being "tuned" (*gestimmt*) to a certain musical note, so that when Kant writes that the imagination "hearkens to the voice [*Stimme*] of reason" (CJ, Ak. V: 254), it is as if reason is singing a siren-song to the imagination to follow humanity's supersensible vocation (*Bestimmung*).

[22]The construction of arithmetical concepts also involves the recognition of *successive* units in counting and of the *coexistence* of counted units in a sum, so that time is more operative in arithmetical presentation than in geometrical—but this is not a crucial point for comparison with the sublime. In addition to coexistence and succession, a third characteristic of time, *duration*, is employed in the construction of concepts in physics such as velocity and moving force, as one sees in Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*.

[23]I am quite deliberately avoiding the claim that the *mathematical* sublime presents a *dynamic* form. The metaphors of departure, limit, and return that characterize Kant's treatment of the mathematical sublime are still *spatial* metaphors—hence my preference for the term "kinetic." Although motion necessarily involves time, Kant is emphasizing the fundamental spatiality of form in the mathematical sublime. The dynamical sublime involves a movement that is not fundamentally spatial but temporal, so that I am carefully leaving room for a distinction of the *kinetic* from the *dynamic*.

vention of reason and its idea of totality, formlessness would never produce a feeling of sublimity which is, in the end, a pleasure (*Lust*). It would only result in the displeasure (*Unlust*) of dissatisfaction with the incompetence of one's imaginative powers and disgust with the object that reveals that incompetence. At the point of this dissatisfaction, however, "the mind hearkens[24] within itself to the voice of reason" in its demand for the presentation of a quantitative totality—even that of infinity—as given (CJ, Ak. V: 254). Thus the mental *kinēsis* of the mathematical sublime is a movement shaped even more by the voice of reason and its ideas than by the formless object encountered in nature, since without reason's demand, imagination would return to its original "middle measure" (*Mittelmaß*) without a transposition into an agitating liking. Thus the sublime is kinetic in a second sense, in that it leaves the mind in an agitated state of movement or at least of disposition to move.

In contrast to the mathematical sublime, the dynamical sublime is an encounter with overwhelming natural power rather than with unimaginable size: "Nature, regarded in an aesthetic judgment as might (*Macht*) that has no power (*Gewalt*) over us, is *dynamically sublime*" (CJ, Ak. V: 260). While in the mathematical sublime, the formlessness[25] of an object of nature does violence to our imaginative power (CJ, Ak V; 245), here nature has no power (*Gewalt*) over us, insofar as we have a supersensible moral existence and vocation. One feels this kind of sublimity in the face of an earthquake or volcano, where I see the forces of nature threatening to destroy my body but reflect that my moral worth and the supersensible ground of my moral agency are not in nature's power to destroy.

As Kant puts it, "the humanity in our person remains undegraded [*unerniedrigt*]" (CJ, Ak. V: 262). *Erniedrigen*, which could also be translated, "to humiliate," has the literal sense of pushing someone downward. The dynamical sublime, in its resistance to this oppression, "raises" (*erhöhen*) the powers of the soul (CJ, Ak. V: 261) and "lifts up [*erhebt*] the imagination to presentation [*Darstellung*] of those cases where the mind can make felt the sublimity of its vocation even above nature" (CJ, Ak. V: 262). It is important to notice the difference in metaphor between the mathematical and the

[24]I resort here to the archaic "hearkens" to render the double meaning of listening and obeying expressed in *hören auf*.

[25]This is not to say that the object of a feeling of sublimity is always formless, only that its form is such that we cannot take it in in a single glance.

dynamical sublime. In the mathematical sublime, a natural object leads the imagination *outward*,[26] as it were, toward its limit, while in the dynamical sublime the image is of a natural object that threatens to push us *downward*—but the resistance of reason lifts us to a higher state of mind.[27] The presentation is of a natural force over against the supersensible counterforce of our own moral vocation.

One presupposition of the dynamical sublime is that imagination tries to treat nature as a *schema* for the ideas of reason (CJ, Ak. V: 265), unsuccessfully, of course, since ideas cannot be presented (*dargestellt werden*, CJ, Ak. V: 268) in any spatio-temporal intuition.[28] Kant is not explicit here as to how imagination's attempt to use nature as a schema of ideas functions, so the interpretation can only be an approximative expansion of the text. The context suggests that it is the apparently endless might (*Macht*) of nature that imagination seeks to use to present the might of our supersensible vocation. In this effort, however, imagination finds in this vocation of reason a superiority (*Überlegenheit*, CJ, Ak. V: 261) even to the might of nature at its greatest, since we always have the ability to make free choices contrary to all the resistance that nature could offer. Thus, Kant writes: "One can describe the sublime in this way: it is an object (of nature), the representation of which determines the mind to think the failure of nature to attain to a presentation [*Darstellung*] of ideas" (CJ, Ak. V: 268).

This definition of the sublime, however, seems to cause Kant more dissatisfaction than satisfaction, because it does not capture what is most essential about both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, namely, the unsuccessful striving of the imagination to use nature as a schema of ideas. It is the *capacity for reason* that

> produces this fruitless striving [*Bestrebung*] to make the representations of the senses commensurate to [reason's idea of totality]. This striving and the feeling of the unattainability of the idea through the imagination is itself a presentation [*Darstellung*] of the

[26] As I have noted above, the object only *initiates* this outward movement; it is reason's demand for the presentation of a totality that actually pushes imagination to its maximum.

[27] To make the most (perhaps too much) of the metaphors here, one might say that the mathematical sublime is a *sublime of breadth*, in its language of departure and return, while the dynamical sublime is a *sublime of depth*, with its language of pushing down and raising up.

[28] The other presupposition is that one's mind already possesses a certain receptivity for ideas of reason.

> subjective purposiveness [*Zweckmäßigkeit*] of our mind in the employment of the imagination for its supersensible vocation and requires us subjectively to *think* nature itself in its totality as the presentation [*Darstellung*] of something supersensible, without being able *objectively* to bring this presentation about. (CJ, Ak. V: 268)

The ideas of reason do not gain a presentation in intuition by means of the feeling of the sublime. However, the subjective purposiveness of judgment in using imagination in the service of the supersensible *is* presented through the *striving* of imagination to use nature to present the supersensible.

Kant suggests that, although the imagination in the sublime does not succeed in its attempt to use nature as a schema of the supersensible, the presentation involved here is a schematic *process*, albeit with a crucial difference from the first *Critique* schematism of the categories. In the sublime, the imagination works "according to the principles of the schematism of judgment (and is therefore to this degree subordinate [*untergeordnet*] to freedom)" and becomes, in this way, "a tool [*Werkzeug*] of reason and its ideas" (CJ, Ak. V: 269). In the first *Critique*, imagination is subordinate to the understanding when it schematizes categories; here, it is subordinate to reason and, particularly, to its idea of freedom. There is also a further, and perhaps more important difference, in that the imagination's subordination to reason in the sublime is not a servitude but a free agreement and harmony with reason's aims.

The presentation that occurs in the sublime is abstract and merely negative; the very abstractness of it (and the fact that a presentation *can* abstract from the limitations of imagination) is a "presentation of the infinite" and expands the soul (CJ, Ak. V: 274). It is necessary that it be a negative presentation, "since the *unfathomability of the idea of freedom* entirely cuts off any path to a positive presentation of it" (CJ, Ak. V: 275, Kant's emphasis). Freedom is presented *through* imagination's inability to present it.

IV.

Implications of the Sublime for Action. The feeling of the sublime is an agitation (*Rührung*) and, as such, would seem to dispose the subject toward some action or other (CJ, Ak. V: 245). The pouring out of life forces that follows the initial suppression of these forces in the encounter with a form-

less object or with the seemingly endless might of nature (CJ, Ak. V: 245) is likewise a disposition to "lively" activity. Thus, the bare structure of feeling one finds in the sublime already contributes to action in the sense of activity, although attention to more than this bare structure is needed in order for the sublime to contribute to action that is directed or, ultimately, moral.[29] Restlessness does not, of itself, lead to virtuous action.

The momentary suppression of life forces and their subsequent greater pouring-out has an awakening and enlivening effect on the mind. As I have noted in the introduction to this paper, Kant's definition of life entails a sense of acting according to one's representations in order to bring the object of those representations about, so that the connection of the sublime to the feeling of life also suggests its connection to action. Rudolf Makkreel has analyzed Kant's feeling of life at length.[30] He writes that "life must involve not only the capacity to act, but also the consciousness of being acted upon," and that this consciousness of being acted upon "engenders a capacity to respond."[31] The connection of pleasure and displeasure with the feeling of life in both the beautiful and the sublime widens not only the notion of pleasure but that of life; pure aesthetic pleasure and displeasure involve a responsiveness not just to sensible charms but to objects of sense as connected with or compared to representations of understanding and reason.[32]

The sublime results in a greater than normal pouring-out of life forces after their momentary suppression. This awakening and enlivening entails a disposition to action, a sort of mental restlessness that encourages the powers of the mind to depart from their "middle measure" (*Mittelmaß*) and strive upward or outward toward the limits of its powers. However, Makkreel's point that the feeling of life is tied to responsiveness as well as to spontaneous activity adds a further consequence of the sublime for the philosophy of action. The application of the moral law requires a "judgment, refined by experience" in order to distinguish those cases where the moral law is to be applied, as well as to obtain its influence over our power of choice (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. VI: 389). The responsiveness encoun-

[29]There are many actions that can be directed without being directly moral. All of the actions commanded by only hypothetical imperatives (that is to say, actions carried out only in order to accomplish a certain end) are of this sort.

[30]See Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 88–107.

[31]Ibid., 91.

[32]This sentence is my amplification of a point made by Makkreel (see ibid.,106).

tered in aesthetic judgments of beauty and especially those of sublimity can be seen as contributing to this refinement of judgment in the following way.

The application of the moral law to lived experience would seem to require two distinct kinds of responsiveness for Kant. The first is a responsiveness to just what sort of beings human beings are, that is to say, an *anthropological* responsiveness.[33] Both understanding and reason for Kant are capacities of finite rational creatures as such, but judgment—most of all in its aesthetic exercise—mediates an imaginative relation of these general cognitive faculties to our particular forms of spatio-temporal sensibility. Both the beautiful and the sublime display states of attunement among our mental faculties that are distinctively human. The attunement involved in the sublime is, at least in one sense, more important for action, since it disposes us to activity, while the effect of the beautiful is contemplative. The second kind of responsiveness needed for the application of the moral law is a responsiveness to the circumstances in which individuals and the species as a whole are placed. This *circumstantial* responsiveness includes the relation of human beings to the nature around them; the sublime promotes this responsiveness both by making us attentive to the magnitude and might of natural phenomena and by representing these phenomena as having a meaning that uplifts humanity rather than humiliating it.

The activity the sublime spurs one to is, in fact, oriented or directed by the sublime's reference—however negative or indirect—to ideas of the supersensible, particularly to the ideas of infinity and of our supersensible moral vocation. The sublime constitutes "an awakening of the feeling of a supersensible capacity in us" (CJ, Ak. V: 250). This awakening forces us to an acknowledgement that our existence is not limited by sensible conditions of bodily and psychological nature. It attunes our mental powers to "hear" the voice of reason (see CJ, Ak. V: 254), and disposes us to follow it by giving us a sense of ourselves as beings who are capable of following such a voice.

In the mathematical sublime, we find that we have a capacity to think infinity, if not positively to present it in intuition, which would require an intellectual intuition. This capacity merely to think infinity is an "expansion

[33]I have extrapolated the two types of responsiveness that I claim are necessary for the application of the moral law in Kant from Kant's remark that this application requires anthropology, as well as from his description of anthropology as the study of the nature and peculiarities of the human species and of the circumstances in which humanity finds itself.

of the mind, which feels itself capable of overstepping the limitations [*Schranken*] of sensibility from a ... practical point of view" (CJ, Ak. V: 255). Kant does not describe clearly in this context what limitations of sensibility he means for the mind, uplifted by the feeling of sublimity, to overstep, but the sense of not being bound by merely sensible conditions in one's actions is an advantage Kant seeks throughout his moral philosophy.

Not only does the sublime encourage a sense of not being bound by sensible conditions (or of being more than just a sensible being), it produces a feeling of the resistance (*Widerstand*) of our moral nature against the interests and inclinations of the senses (CJ, Ak. V: 267). It thus encourages us to "count ourselves equal to" nature and even to consider ourselves rivals of nature. It further gives us the idea of a possible supersensible employment of nature and of our own determinability through this idea (CJ, Ak. V: 267). A supersensible employment of nature would be a use of nature for the carrying out of our own moral vocation, that is to say, for producing the effects in the world of sense of what the moral law commands. Our failed striving in the sublime to present reason's idea of totality in intuition forces us at least to *think* of nature as the presentation (*Darstellung*) of something supersensible (CJ, Ak. V: 268). Thinking of nature as a whole as a presentation of the supersensible encourages us to think of nature as a field of activity for the exercise of moral imperatives.

In all these contributions to action, the sublime reveals the imagination as a tool for reason's use that can enliven the mind to the pursuit of actions that reason can only think. The imagination in its power to present (*darzustellen*) can prepare the ground for the realization of these actions in life, by producing a mental attunement that disposes us to activity, by connecting this restless, enthusiastic disposition with ideas of reason and thus directing it toward moral ends, and by promoting a sense of nature as a possible field of activity for the efficacious agency commanded by our supersensible vocation.

Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, California