

“Kant’s Physical Geography and the Critical Philosophy”

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Abstract:

Kant’s geographical theory, which was informed by contemporary travel reports, diaries, and journals, developed before his so-called “critical turn.” There are several reasons to study Kant’s lectures and material on geography. For instance, the geography provided Kant with terms, concepts, and metaphors which he employed in order to present or elucidate the critical philosophy. Some of the germs of what would become Kant’s critical philosophy can already be detected in the geography course. Finally, Kant’s geography is also one (though not the only) source of some of the empirical claims in his philosophical works, including the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. To give an example of this, I examine his account of the sublime.

Keywords:

geography, transcendental philosophy, sublime, Kant, de Saussure, Savary, meta-philosophy

1. Why Kant’s geography now?

The sage of Königsberg—who, infamously, never travelled far from his home city—began lecturing on geography in the summer of 1756. This was Kant’s second semester of university teaching. He continued until he retired from teaching in 1796. In fact, geography was one of his most popular courses. Kant taught it 49 times—third of all his courses, following only logic (56 times) and metaphysics (53), in which he held a Chair. Today, there are 32 manuscripts of the geography lectures available; this makes geography second only to anthropology (of which 36 are available at present).¹ Kant considered his geography course to be one of his most important and useful. He conceived of it as a worldly or cosmopolitan philosophy, a way to impart beneficial knowledge of the world

¹ These numbers are based on Steve Naragon’s remarkable website. See <http://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Kant/Home/index.htm> [accessed September 15, 2016]

(*Weltkenntnis*) (*PG*, AA 9:157).² Given the popularity of the course, students apparently agreed that it was useful, or at least found it interesting.³

Kant's geography merits closer examination for a number of historical, conceptual-philosophical, and philological reasons.

There is a growing awareness of Kant's place in the history of geography. Although Kant has not always been recognized for his efforts in geography, recent scholarship has increasingly acknowledged Kant's contributions to the field. For instance, the chapters in the useful interdisciplinary collection, *Reading Kant's Geography* (Elden and Mendieta 2011), document the sources of Kant's geography and its legacy. This is not to say that the reception is entirely uncritical. To the contrary, some of the authors analyze troubled (and troubling) issues in Kant's geography, including, but not limited to, his views about race and race theory.

Robert Loudon holds that Kant's geography has not been viewed as being as important as his ethics, logic, metaphysics, theology, or anthropology. Loudon suggests that such oversight is unwarranted, and gives four (conceptual-philosophical) reasons readers should take Kant's geography more seriously (Louden 2014:453-61). First, Kant's writings are permeated with geographical metaphors broadly construed (for instance, of boundaries, borders, limits; seas and oceans; grounds and dwelling places; domains and territories).⁴ If we desire to understand his philosophy broadly construed, we should know something about his geography. Geography and philosophy are deeply intertwined with one another. Second, geography is an essentially contested concept, and we would learn more about the nature of geography by looking at Kant's vision for it. Kant's views of the nature of geography (expressed in the Introduction and opening sections of the *Physical Geography* edited by Friedrich Theodor Rink), and specifically Kant's (occasional)⁵ conception of geography as a science of

² References to Kant are taken from the Academy Edition's *Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (1900–), as indicated in the Reference list.

³ For geography as a kind of cosmopolitan "philosophy," see Wilson 2011. For geography's relation to anthropology, see Wilson 2007.

⁴ The maritime metaphor of "boundaries," a "continuous coastline of experiences" and a "shoreless ocean" (*CPR* A 395f.) is discussed in Ferrini 2014 (especially 159ff.). This was by no means the first maritime metaphor for either Kant or other modern writers. Ferrini notes that Tetens (1775) employs a maritime metaphor (of a shoreless ocean) similar to that used by Kant in the 1763 essay, "The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God" (AA 2:66). Cf. Kant's 1772 Reflection 4458 (AA 17:559) and earlier (1756) *Physical Monadology*, AA 1:475. On the theoretical significance of Kant's nautical metaphors, see also Garelli 1995.

⁵ Loudon observes that Kant is not always clear about the chorological, spatial nature of geography and that Kant does not consistently adhere to the view that geography should be defined as a descriptive

space, has been influential, at least to an extent. Specifically, it has influenced the theories of Alexander von Humboldt and Alfred Hettner, as well as the U.S. geographer Richard Hartshorne (1938; 1958).⁶ Geography needs to be theorized, and engaging Kant offers a way to do that better. Third, we can learn about Kant's (morally-oriented) pedagogical aims and what he desired his students to learn and know. Kantian geography provides students with a broad, empirically informed orientation toward the world at large and a knowledge base intended to enable them to become better informed, more effective (and, at least in principle, more ethical) cosmopolitan citizens. Finally, one can learn about Kant's theory of anthropology and complex views of human beings, which make up an important part of the subject matter of the geography lectures. Although his geography course was technically called physical geography, there is a good deal of cultural or human geography in it.

My interests in this paper come closest to Loudon's first reason, concerning geographical metaphors. I would like to propose at least one further, and perhaps parallel, reason. The geography is one (but not the only) source of some of the empirical claims cited and elucidated in Kant's philosophical works. Kant uses examples from the geography and takes over terms and concepts from it. While geography is not the only discipline that provides source material for Kant's philosophy—chemistry, physics, mathematics, and other sciences and empirical disciplines do too—it surely is one of them.

Stuart Elden (2009; 2011) offers a number of compelling reasons to reassess Kant's geography, some of which overlap with those of Robert Loudon. First, Elden notes that there are compelling philological reasons to study the geography, stemming from the state of scholarship. (I will return to this in the following two paragraphs.) Second, he makes a claim that is similar to Loudon's second point: we should reconsider the position Kant occupies in the discipline of geography as a whole, including his theory of space. We can study the way in which Kant structured geographical knowledge, and how he understood its relation to history and philosophy. Third, philosophers are beginning to integrate an understanding of the geography into a critical assessment of Kant's oeuvre. This third point is one of the themes shared by Elden, Loudon, and other scholars (Ferrini 2014): how geography can help us better understand Kant's philosophy and how Kant's geography influenced or was used to

science of spatial (non-temporal, non-historical) relations (e.g., *PG*, AA 9:160, 162). Kant sometimes allows geography to include *temporal* relations and descriptions, hence to involve a history or developmental story—making it closer to a natural history than to a static description or classification (or what Kant sometimes calls a “systematic” classification modeled after Linnaeus). Kant is ultimately not consistent here (Louden 2014:456).

⁶ For discussion of Hartshorne, see Elden and Mendieta 2011; Elden 2009; and Loudon 2014.

present or articulate the philosophy, even if Kant did not always recognize it explicitly. It also comes closest to the topic to be pursued in this paper. Specifically, I would like to consider geography as a source of some of the empirical claims used to elucidate and present Kant's philosophical arguments and analyses,⁷ and to show how the geography contains some of the germs of the critical philosophy.

In addition to conceptual and philosophical reasons, there are philological reasons why we should further examine Kant's geography. The Rink edition (1802) of *Physical Geography* has finally been translated into English in its entirety (Kant 2012b:439-679).⁸ In addition, the editors of the German Academy edition of Kant's collected writings have plans to publish student notes of Kant's geography lectures (AA vol. 26.2, forthcoming).⁹ (Yet it should also be pointed out that much of the material has existed since Kant's day in manuscript form.) In 2009, the Academy published the Holstein geography transcription (AA vol. 26.1:1–320), which is based on a clean-copy of Kant's own lecture notes, and dates from between 1757 and 1759. Careful philological work (carried out, for instance, by Werner Stark) has exposed the significant extent to which the Rink edition of the lectures was altered or corrupted during the transcription or editorial process. Accordingly, the geography corpus merits a re-examination, to see what Kant likely did or did not claim or maintain.

The publication of the geography transcriptions in the Academy edition, which is supposed to bring the Academy edition to completion (remarkably) after well over a century, constitutes a significant achievement. As is occurring in the case of its allied or kin discipline, anthropology (Kant 2012a), there will likely continue to be increased scholarly interest in geography and a corresponding increase in studies and translations of the geography lectures. In short, scholars from history of philosophy, history of science, Kant studies, and from geography and related disciplines are and will continue to be confronted with how best to understand the geography manuscripts and publications, as well as their historical and philosophical significance.¹⁰

⁷ Ferrini (2014:178) arrives at a kindred, if distinct, conclusion: "I contend that this primary source of maritime culture [i.e., Georg Forster's account of his second voyage] is the proper source of Kant's metaphor of the sea in the first *Critique*."

⁸ The Rink edition was partially translated into English twice, by Bolin (1968) and May (1970).

⁹ The AA volume 26.2 is expected to include the transcriptions known as *Hesse* (1770), *Kaehler* (circa 1774), *Messina* (circa 1776), *Dönhoff* (circa 1782), and *Dohna* (1792), as well as the extract from a version (circa 1791) of the lectures first published in 1833 by Johann Adam Bergk (1769–1834) using the pseudonym Friedrich Christian Starke.

¹⁰ For information about the geography course and manuscripts as well as about Kant's sources, historical context, and legacy, see Adickes 1911, Elden 2009, Loudon 2014, the contributions in Elden

There remains much to be said about the textual, philological, and historical aspects surrounding Kant's geography and about its role in the history of geography, but rather than pursuing this here, I would like to elucidate my additional reasons to study Kant's geography. The geography provided Kant with some empirical claims which he made use of in his philosophical works, including but not limited to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). To illustrate how the critical philosophy¹¹ made use of geography, I will examine Kant's theory of the sublime in the third *Critique*. In addition, I will cite and discuss some passages in which we can see the germs of Kant's critical philosophy.

In a sense, my aim is thus rather modest. I would not go as far as to say that studying Kant's geography is necessary for understanding the crucial but narrower questions of Kant's transcendental philosophy, such as how synthetic a priori judgments are possible. It is likewise doubtful that the geography is necessary in order to understand Kant's transcendental theory of space, since the latter abstracts from empirically given content. I therefore am not arguing that the geography is *the* key to Kant's transcendental philosophy, or anything as bold (or general) as that. Rather, I submit that the geography provides a useful lens through which to view the emergence of the critical philosophy and to interpret certain core areas of Kant's philosophy. The sublime, I think, provides a useful example of this.¹²

In what follows, I examine (section two) Kant's geography and its influence on, or relation to, the critical philosophy. In the third section, I discuss Kant's theory of the sublime with respect to the present theme. I show that Kant appropriates geographical and geological texts and travel writings into his theory of the sublime, by citing works by the Egyptologist Claude-Étienne Savary and the geologist and Alpinist, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure.

2. Geography and critical philosophy

Kant's geography was well known even in his own day, at least in Prussian-Baltic circles. In the late 1750s and early 1760s, Kant's geography was known in Königsberg for its views on climate, as

and Mendieta 2011 (especially Stark 2011), Ferrini 2014, and Kant 2012b. See also the useful website maintained by Werner Stark at <http://kant.bbaw.de/> [accessed 5 October 2016].

¹¹ I will not press on the differences between transcendental and critical philosophy, but refer to Kant's philosophy generally.

¹² Kant's claims about the Maori and tattooing (*CPJ*, AA 5:230) constitute another instance of when the geography informs his discussion of aesthetic judgment (i.e., the judgment of beauty).

letters from Sebastian Friedrich Trescho (dated 23 January and 5 March 1760) to Ludwig Ernst Borowski reveal. Trescho writes: “I further believe that in some chapters of the physical geography, Herr Kant demonstrates the climate’s influence and bearing on the mentality and conduct of the peoples.”¹³

Unlike Anton Friedrich Büsching, a contemporary of Kant’s whose work (1754)¹⁴ on geography was partly based on personal travels, Kant never ventured outside the boundaries of East Prussia (Withers 2011:54). How, if he never traveled very far, could Kant have carried out such work in geography? In order to give his course on geography, he prepared his own notes. There was no standard textbook available that he could assign in his course—as the Prussian authorities typically required university professors to do. (Kant was given a special dispensation to use his own notes for the geography course). His course was based in part on ardent reading of travel reports and journals, such as those of worldwide voyagers Georg Forster (1754-1794)¹⁵ and James Cook (1728-1777), or Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1740-1799), supplemented no doubt by conversations with friends and peers who had travelled— Königsberg was hardly a backwater town, but an active commercial city on the Pregel River. In his own words (1757), Kant explains his preparation as follows:

I have used all sources, sought out all information, and, in addition to what the works of Varenius, Buffon, and Lulof contain in the way of the general fundamentals of physical geography, I have gone through the most thorough descriptions of individual countries by capable travellers, the *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen*, the *Göttingische Sammlung neuer und merkwürdiger Reisen*, the *Hamburg* and the *Leipzig Magazines*, the Proceedings of the Académie des Sciences in Paris and the Stockholm Academy and so forth, and I have constructed a system out of everything relevant to my purposes. (*Plan and Announcement of a*

¹³ See the exchange of letters in the 1750s, when Kant began lecturing on geography. Trescho writes (23 January 1760): “Ich glaube auch dass Hr. Kant in einigen Kapiteln der phys. Geographie den Einfluss und das Verhältniss des Klima zu der Gemüths- und Handlungsart der Völker anzeigt.” Quoted at AA 26.1: LXII.

¹⁴ English translation: Anton Friedrich Büsching, *A New System of Geography*, 6 vols. London: A. Millar, 1792.

¹⁵ Georg Forster, the German-British botanist and natural historian, accompanied his father, Johann Reinhold Forster, on James Cook’s second voyage. Forster’s reports about Cook’s explorations gave Kant material for his courses and writings on geography. The multi-volume book by Forster, *A Voyage [...] Round the World [...]* (1777), was based on Cook’s second voyage around the world and was translated into German as *Johann Reinhold Forster’s Reise um die Welt [...]* (1778-1780).

Kant conceived of his courses in physical geography and anthropology (which he began teaching in winter 1772/73) together, forming part of a worldly or cosmopolitan philosophy. He would often teach geography in the summer and anthropology in the winter semester. He considered both courses to be “pragmatic.” Physical geography was a kind of “knowledge of the world” or *Weltkenntnis* (PG, AA 9:157). For Kant, this meant it aimed at promoting the student’s skillfulness, prudence, and wisdom. Although this is not the place to review the structure and development of the physical geography course,¹⁶ it should be mentioned that it was divided into these sections: i) mathematical geography; ii) natural history of land, rivers, oceans, wind; iii) animals, plants, and minerals; iv) Asia, Africa, Europe, and America. It can be noted for our purposes that the section on land, oceans, and mountains contained some material he would eventually use in the “Analytic of the Sublime” in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

In an early announcement from the late 1750s, Kant claimed that his geography proceeded in a “philosophical way” (*Plan and Announcement of a Series of Lectures on Physical Geography*, AA 2:9). How seriously are we to take this description? One should not read too much into this phrase—“philosophical” might simply be used in its looser, eighteenth-century sense—and I do not think Kant meant anything too profound here. Furthermore, Kant wrote this about two decades before he entered into the critical period. Whether or not the geography course’s Introduction was “one of the most articulate expositions” within the Enlightenment of geography’s philosophical reach (Withers 2011:61), it is certainly true that the Introduction tended to be the more philosophical, systematic, and less empirical part of the course. In any case, Kant’s reference to the “philosophical” does at least implicitly raise an interesting question. Did this body of geography help shape or influence Kant’s philosophy? I think the answer must be affirmative.

As noted above, Kant’s philosophy employed concepts, metaphors, and tropes taken from the geography lectures: germ and predisposition, grounds, islands and oceans, limits and boundaries, borders and territories. Consider, for example, the title of Kant’s work in philosophical theology, *Religion within the Boundaries [Grenzen] of Reason Alone*. Moreover, even if he was not by any means

¹⁶ Werner Stark’s website (see footnote 10, above) is a useful resource for understanding the background, sources, development, and structure of the geography course. See also Stark 2011.

the only Enlightenment thinker to conjoin philosophy and geography,¹⁷ Kant described himself as a “geographer of human reason” (*CPR* A760/ B788).¹⁸ Several scholars have explained how geographical metaphors, concepts, and terms influenced or are used in Kant’s philosophy (Mensch 2013, Louden 2014). For instance, Malpas and Thiel (2011) examine the role of geographic notions such as boundaries and borders in the critical philosophy, and Ferrini (2014) explores Kant’s maritime metaphors (e.g., *CPR* A 236/B295) in relation to his account of imagination and transcendental illusion.

The use of geographical metaphors in the Kantian transcendental-conceptual scheme takes place at a rather *philosophical* level, but the critical philosophy made use of geography in a much more simple and mundane sense. It appealed to geography’s empirical claims, in order to make a more general philosophical point, say, about ends and teleology, or to provide material for a theory of the sublime. For instance, the 1774 geography lecture manuscript *Kaehler*¹⁹ reports that the Greenlandic Inuit received “their wood ... from the water” (*Kaehler*: ms. page 530).²⁰ This is nearly identical to third *Critique*’s claim that the sea brings the wood to their houses:

For other peoples in the same icy regions the sea contains a rich supply of animals which, even beyond the nourishment and clothing that they provide and the wood which the sea as it were washes up for them for houses, also supplies them with fuel for warming their huts. Now here is an admirable confluence of so many relations of nature for one end: and this is the Greenlander, the Lapp, the Samoyed, the Yakut, etc. (*CPJ*, AA 5:369).²¹

¹⁷ The Scottish Common Sense philosopher Thomas Reid, who lectured on geography at King’s College Aberdeen in 1752/53, emphasized geography’s’ propaedeutic value. Reid claimed that geography was an essential part of that philosophy “which may qualify Men for the more useful and important Offices of Society” (Withers 2011:57). Like Kant, Reid urged the commercial utility of geography.

¹⁸ Kant is not alone in using geographical metaphors. Locke, Leibniz, and Hume (among many other moderns) also used this conceptual and rhetorical scheme. But, unlike these predecessors, Kant taught a university course in geography approximately 49 times.

¹⁹ The “*Kaehler*” geography manuscript is located at the rare books and manuscripts library in the University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center (ms codex 1120), Philadelphia. An online facsimile is available at: <http://hdl.library.upenn.edu/1017/d/medren/4259941>. [Accessed 2 October 2016]

²⁰ This passage comes from the last page of the *Kaehler* manuscript. It is not found in F.T. Rink’s *Physical Geography* (which used a *Kaehler*-like manuscript for the *first* part of the course).

²¹ Translations of the third *Critique* are from Kant 2000.

Kant then proceeds to analyze the transcendental status of such reflective teleological judgments or claims about ends.

Now, at this point an interesting, if ultimately quite difficult, question can be asked: what happens if and when such empirical claims turn out to be false, that is, when Kant (or his source) turns out to be wrong? While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to give this question the full attention it deserves, the reader is owed at least an initial response.²² In cases similar to the one at hand (about Inuit and wood), I would submit, it is not clear that Kant's theory of reflective teleological judgment about ends would be vitiated. After all, what one is needed is just a *concept* of relative ends; while it would obviously be preferable if one's factual claims about ends were true, it is not clear that getting this right has any effect on the validity of Kant's argument about reflective teleological judgments.

Unsurprisingly, some of Kant's claims and causal analyses of natural events actually turned out to be false. For instance, Kant makes false claims about perspiration and blood (*PG*, AA 9:317), spiders and insanity (*PG*, AA 9:395), and the causes of goiter (*PG*, AA 9:315). I agree with Loudon that rather than smiling and snickering at Kant's errors and misunderstandings, we should see such claims as empirical statements that are subject to confirmation or refutation by contact with experience (Louden 2014:460). It is not clear that such empirically false claims necessarily defeat Kant's transcendental account, since, in many cases, Kant's empirically false (or causal) claims have no bearing on his theory under discussion, such as his theory of ends in nature, the sublime, or beauty. (I briefly take up this question again below, in the context of the sublime.)

The foregoing discussion proceeds as it were from the geography to the critical philosophy, but it is also worthwhile to ask the question while proceeding in the opposite direction. Do we find germs of Kant's developing critical philosophy in his geography? Here again the answer is affirmative. The beginning of the *Kaehler* manuscript (which is also in the published Rink edition) states that, for all of our knowledge, one must first direct attention to its "origins" (*Kaehler*: ms. pages 1–9; cf. *PG*, AA 9:156–9).²³ This turn to transcendental origins is one of the basic strategies of the critical philosophy. In other words, these influential opening sections of the *Kaehler* (and Rink's *Physical Geography*)

²² The empirical-transcendental relation is too thorny and complex an issue to settle here, but it continues to attract the attention of commentators and critics from various traditions and disciplines (e.g., Mensch 2013; Zammito 2006:39; Cassam 2003).

²³ Since this portion of Rink's *Physical Geography* made use of a manuscript very similar to the *Kaehler* lecture (from the mid-1770s), I indicate the corresponding pages in the Rink edition (AA vol. 9).

reflect Kant's developing transcendental philosophy. This is perhaps even more interesting in light of the fact that in the mid 1770s (the date of the *Kaehler*) Kant was in the middle of the so-called "silent decade," publishing little of philosophical import. Accordingly, the geography lecture gives us a further glance into the development of Kant's philosophy.

In particular, the first three sections of the *Kaehler* lecture (and corresponding sections in the Rink) reveal traces of the developing critical philosophy. Kant claims that for all of our knowledge, one must first direct attention to its "sources" or "origins" (§1; *Kaehler*: ms. page 1; cf. *PG*, AA 9:156). He then states that so far as the sources and origins of our knowledge are concerned, we derive it all either from "pure reason" or from "experience," which in turn is instructed by reason, and that reason gives us pure rational knowledge, whereas knowledge from experience is attained through our "senses." Since the senses cannot transcend the world, our knowledge from experience is limited to the "present world" (§2; *Kaehler*: ms. page 2; cf. *PG*, AA 9:156). Kant adds that we need to become acquainted with the "objects of our experience as a whole," so that our knowledge is not an aggregate but a "system," in which the whole is prior to the parts (*Kaehler*: ms. page 5; cf. *PG*, AA 9:158). The next section (§3) begins with the aforementioned claim that our cognitions "originate" (*fangen an*) (*Kaehler*: ms. page 7; cf. *PG*, AA 9:159) with the senses, which give us the material while reason merely gives "new forms." Thus, the geography lecture reveals traces of elements of what we now recognize as the critical philosophy.

3. A case study: the sublime

The sublime is an aesthetic response to a representation of infinite power or magnitude. Such immense power or size is displayed by a vast or powerful object that appears or looks as if it were formless—paradigmatically, a natural wonder such as a remarkable and striking waterfall, mountain range, canyon, storm, ocean, or starry sky. Since Kant's theory is perhaps the most influential theory of the sublime in the history of aesthetics (alongside the accounts of Longinus and Burke) and has been thoroughly studied, it seems unnecessary to summarize the details of his theory here.²⁴ But it should be noted that recent work on the sublime has emphasized the role and import of *nature*, rather than, as standard readings of the Kantian sublime go, the superiority of reason or rational agency, that is, the superiority of reason *over* nature. For instance, Emily Brady reasserts "the centrality of natural objects

²⁴ Kant's account can be found in sections §§23–29, *CPJ*, AA 5:244–78.

and phenomena” to the sublime (2013:6).²⁵ Indeed, it is true that in the typical or paradigmatic case, the *stimulus* (if not the ultimate referent) of the Kantian sublime, what gets the experience going, is nature—the mountains and oceans that Kant described in his geography lectures. The sublime makes for a useful case study for the claim that the geography influences the critical philosophy by providing some empirical material. In other words, geography (though not just geography) helps Kant formulate his theory of the sublime. His understanding of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, mountain ranges, the dark sea, the boundless ocean, and so on, enables him to provide concrete examples in order to elucidate his account of the sublime (on the sea, see Ferrini 2014:167).

I limit myself to two principal examples (one natural, one artifactual), stemming from the writings of de Saussure and Savary. Kant learned about the remote wilderness from the Genevan geologist and physicist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (*CPJ*, AA 5:265). In the “Analytic of the Sublime,” Kant claims that de Saussure’s “description of his travels in the Alps” is “as inspired as [it] is thorough” (*CPJ*, AA 5:276).²⁶ A remark on the sublime sadness that leads a (melancholic) person to withdraw to the remote regions (“wastelands”) can be compared to a claim from Kant’s geography. The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* states:

Saussure, as inspired as he is thorough, in the description of his travels in the Alps says of Bonhomme, one of the mountains of Savoy: ‘There reigns there a certain tedious sadness.’ But he also knew of an interesting sadness, which is instilled by the view of a wasteland [*Einöde*] to which human beings would move in order to hear or experience nothing more of the world, but which nevertheless must not be so completely inhospitable that it would offer human beings only an extremely burdensome refuge. (*CPJ*, AA 5:276)

²⁵ The now lost “Ms Vigilantius,” based on a summer 1793 course, contained a section on the purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) of mountains, thereby potentially connecting the two parts of the third *Critique* (aesthetics and teleology). Although by “purposiveness” Kant likely only would have meant to refer to the relative usefulness of mountains for organized beings and plants (hence as playing a role in a network of relative ends), it is tempting to imagine Kant fleshing out the third *Critique*’s characterization of the sublime as containing an initially contrapurposive *purposiveness* or finality, in other words, as emphasizing the natural sublime (mountains) as having a kind of finality after all, closer to that of the experience of natural beauty than his presentation in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” narrowly construed, would allow.

²⁶ Horace-Bénédict de Saussure made the second ascent of Mont Blanc in 1787. A German translation of the entirety of *Voyages dans les Alpes [...]* was published in Leipzig between 1781 and 1788, and abbreviated as *Nachricht von einer Alpenreise des Herrn von Saussure* in Berlin in 1789.

In explaining what might be called the sublimity of solitude or independence, Kant is drawing from material he presented in his geography course (though the regions he discusses are different). In the geography lecture, Kant distinguishes between deserts, which are unfit for human habitation, and wastelands, which humans choose to abandon.

Some regions, such as those in America near Peru where tribes roam about only rarely [...] are uninhabited only as a result of the human power of choice, [...] and thus are called wastelands [*Einöden*] ... Deserts [*Wüsten*] are really places where nature determines and makes it so that human beings cannot live there. (Kaehler: ms. page 141; cf. *PG*, AA 9:234)

The second example comes from the Egyptian Pyramids. Here the discussion of the sublime concerns not nature, but an artifact—even if, suggestively, from a certain distance the pyramid or pyramids can take on the look of a mountain or mountain range. Kant read about the Egyptian Pyramids through the travel writings of Claude-Étienne Savary (1750-1788), orientalist, pioneer of Egyptology, and translator of the Quran (Paris, 1783). After claiming that there is in the act of holding together, or comprehension (*Zusammenfassung*), a greatest point beyond which the imagination cannot progress, Kant writes:

This makes it possible to explain²⁷ a point that Savary notes in his report on Egypt: that in order to get the full emotional effect of the magnitude of the pyramids one must neither come too close to them nor be too far away. For in the latter case, the parts that are apprehended (the stones piled on top of one another) are represented only obscurely, and their representation has no effect on the aesthetic judgment of the subject. In the former case, however, the eye requires some time to complete its apprehension from the base level to the apex, but during this time the former always partly fades before the imagination has taken in the latter, and the comprehension is never complete. (*CPJ*, AA 5:252)

The passage in Savary's three-volume *Lettres sur l'Égypte*, from which Kant apparently drew, is much shorter:

²⁷ In other words, Kant's transcendental account explains the 'condition of possibility' of the empirical claim reported by Savary.

Having arrived at the bottom of the pyramid, we circled it while contemplating it with a sort of terror [*effroi*]. When considered up close, it seems to be made of blocks of stones, but from a hundred feet, the size [*grandeur*] of the stones is lost in the immensity of the edifice, and they seem very small. (Savary 1786, vol. 1:189; author's translation)²⁸

Savary does not mention the experience of the sublime, technically speaking. He mentions "terror," which one could certainly connect to the sublime and is reminiscent of Burke's characterization of the sublime as a mode of terror, but Savary does not pursue this point. Savary wanted to compose, after all, a piece of travel writing, not philosophy. Accordingly, Kant's use of Savary's text in the presentation and formulation of his theory of the sublime seems to be largely the former's original contribution.

It is worth restating that I am not claiming that the geography is the key to understanding Kant's critical philosophy or even his theory of the sublime. On the contrary, lectures on material from other disciplines (such as, for instance, physics, religion, and anthropology) also contributed to the formulation of the philosophy broadly construed to include both theoretical and practical philosophy. Kant's understanding of the physical and mathematical sciences is evident when one studies Kant's theoretical philosophy. In the areas of practical philosophy, in particular, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* more than the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant clearly drew from his views of anthropology. When it came even to aesthetics and, specifically, a theory of the sublime, other disciplines besides geography gave Kant occasion to present or comment on the matter. For instance, in the Pölitiz metaphysics lectures from the late 1770s (V-Met-L1/Pölitiz, AA 28:236), Kant describes the overwhelming experience of St. Peter's Basilica in the context of a discussion of running through a manifold and the formation of images.²⁹ "So it is reported that when a stranger enters St. Peter's church in Rome, he is wholly disconcerted on account of the manifold splendor. The cause is: his soul cannot go through the manifold in order to illustrate it." This example was later used to present and elucidate his account of the sublime in the third *Critique* (CPJ, AA 5:252).

²⁸ Cf. the Guyer/Matthews translation of this passage at Kant 2000:374 n.9. I have not been able to locate a reference to Savary in Kant's geography lectures. Nevertheless, Savary's text would clearly belong to the class of travel reports that Kant avidly read in order to prepare his lecture on geography.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida (1987:141) mentions the pyramids and Saint Peter's basilica in his discussion of the "colossal," seeing them as relations of the "body" of the aesthetic perceiver to "stone" (the pyramids, the cathedral).

Before concluding, I would like to revisit the epistemological and meta-philosophical question introduced above, concerning the implications for transcendental philosophy of empirically false claims. The question can be re-formulated in terms of the sublime. Suppose, for instance, that in presenting his theory of the (free, pure) sublime, Kant described the height or size of the Egyptian Pyramids incorrectly, that for instance, he was incorrect by a few meters. Would this matter for his philosophical account? It seems to me that this would not make much difference to his explanation of the alleged universality and necessary (i.e., a priori) nature of the experience, which is, after all, what interested him in the *Critique*. If not that, then what *would* matter? If he claimed that a renowned waterfall was *powerful*, and it turned out that it was not? Or that the pyramids were vast and large when in fact they were not? This also appears to be inconsequential. Kant would have just gotten the facts wrong, and there would be no implication for his transcendental account. He could simply cite another example.

Consider Kant's remarks about the ice and seas in the polar regions. Kant's theory of the sublime appeals to examples taken from what he had read about these geographical regions. For instance: "And who would want to call sublime shapeless mountain masses towering above one another in wild disorder with their pyramids of ice, or the dark and raging sea, etc.?" (*CPJ*, AA 5:256). Kant's geography drew in part from the work of the Swiss geographer Samuel Engel (1702-1784). Engel's (1765) *Mémoires et Observations Géographiques et Critiques* influenced contemporary views on polar exploration. Unfortunately, Engel's claims about open and ice-free northern seas turned out to be false (*PG*, AA 9:231f.). These polar seas are (at least at present) not completely open and ice-free. Is this fatal for Kant's theory of the sublime? It seems difficult to maintain that it is. The burden of proof lies with whoever wishes to argue that it is fatal, and a convincing explanation would be due.

Thus, it is hard to point to an empirical fact the falsity of which would suddenly defeat this transcendental theory of the pure or free sublime. The theory of the sublime simply does not appear to be falsifiable like this.

But what happens when factual knowledge (of the object) is essential to the experience of the sublime? Kant implicitly suggests a distinction between free (pure) and impure *sublimity*—just as, one might say, he distinguishes between free (pure) and impure *beauty* (or judgments of beauty). The experience of the *pure* sublime is an aesthetic response to an "appearance," or what strikes the eye when an object is viewed "merely as the poets" see it. Kant implicitly makes a distinction between a

free and pure sublimity and a more conceptual or intellectual sublimity in the following rich passage, worth quoting in full:

In the transcendental aesthetic of the power of judgment it is strictly pure aesthetic judgments that are at issue, consequently the examples must not be drawn from those beautiful or sublime objects of nature that presuppose the concept of an end; for in that case it would be either teleological or grounded in mere sensations of an object (gratification or pain), and thus in the first case would not be an aesthetic purposiveness and in the second case not a merely formal purposiveness. Thus, if someone calls the sight of the starry heavens sublime, he must not ground such a judging of it on concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings, taking the bright points with which we see the space above us to be filled as their suns, about which they move in their purposively appointed orbits, but must take it, as we see it, merely as a broad, all-embracing vault; and it must be merely under this representation that we posit the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment attributes to this object. In just the same way, we must not take the sight of the ocean as we think it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge (which are not, however, contained in the immediate intuition), for example as a wide realm of water creatures, as the great storehouse of water for the evaporation which impregnates the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or as an element that separates parts of the world from one another but at the same time makes possible the greatest community among them, for this would yield merely teleological judgments; rather, one must consider the ocean merely as the poets do, in accordance with what its appearance shows, for instance, when it is considered in periods of calm, as a clear watery mirror bounded only by the heavens, but also when it is turbulent, an abyss threatening to devour everything, and yet still be able to find it sublime. (*CPJ*, AA 5:270)

The experience of this intellectual kind of sublimity is partly grounded on concepts or incorporates them into the judgment. The set of concepts at hand in this particular passage includes concepts of *ends* (hence Kant implies that such a judgment would be mixed and partly teleological). One could say more generally: it brings in the “facts” of the matter, or what we “think” of the object (in this case, concerning ends or purposes). The starry sky can be judged in terms of concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings, orbiting other suns or stars. The ocean can likewise be considered “as we think it,” that is, as a “great storehouse of water for the evaporation which impregnates the air with clouds for the

benefit of the land.” Suppose such knowledge can be combined with, or even an integral component of, an *aesthetic* experience of the sublime. (The nature of this combination, unification, or interaction need not concern us here.) In such cases, we view and aesthetically judge the natural object before us while at the same time incorporating into the experience our knowledge or understanding of the natural world and the environment. We appreciate or take pleasure in it aesthetically while bearing in mind what kind of object it is, such as its class or kind, or its role in the ecosystem, or even (Kant might add) nature as a “system” of ends connected to each other and forming a whole.

Now, what happens, in the case of a more *conceptual* or intellectual (impure) sublime, if the appreciator has false empirical claims? If one gets the facts wrong in this case, it would seem to be a problem for the person trying to experience the sublime. The inaccurate or false conception of the object before him or her would likely block, or at least distort, the experience of that person at that moment.

Nevertheless, even in that case, Kant’s *transcendental* account would not be falsified or defeated. Kant’s transcendental theory does not depend on the truth of those facts, since it is a theory *about* and explanation of the experience of the sublime, and is not itself a first-order experience of the sublime. The appreciator’s experience might be interrupted or distorted by the false conception of nature or the object, but it is difficult to see why or how Kant’s account would be defeated.

4. Conclusion

I have described some points of intersection between Kant’s geography and critical philosophy, especially in the *Critique* that further elaborates Kant’s views of nature, the environment, and natural world, namely, the third *Critique*. Kant’s theory of the sublime provides a useful opportunity to study the interaction between geography and critical philosophy.

Since more transcriptions of Kant’s lectures on geography are expected to be published in the Academy edition in the near future, and one can only anticipate more translations of the lectures (on par with that of Rink’s *Physical Geography*), scholarly interest in Kant’s geography can only be expected to gain further momentum, perhaps not unlike what has occurred in the case of Kant’s anthropology. When making sense of the claims, context, and legacy of Kant’s geography, it is helpful to consider the points of intersection of the geography and critical philosophy and their mutual influence on each other, including how one can discern the development of the latter in the former.

Abbreviations

- AA Academy edition [*Akademie Ausgabe*]. In *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*
CPR *Critique of Pure Reason* [*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*] (in AA vols. 3 and 4)
CPJ *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilkraft*] (in AA vol. 5)
PG *Physical Geography* [*Physische Geographie*] (in AA vol. 9)

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