CHAPTER 8

The Kantian Sublime: A Feeling of Superiority?

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In this paper, I would like to reveal an ambiguity in the Kantian conception of the sublime experience. I will do this in an indirect manner by turning to a thinker whose views on the sublime are strongly influenced by Immanuel Kant: Friedrich Schiller. In his text Über das Pathetische, Schiller argues that the satisfaction of the sublime experience is ultimately grounded in the discovery of the faculty of freedom, whether this faculty is employed in moral or immoral actions. In this way, Schiller creates a gap between aesthetics and ethics which is absent in Kant’s theory of the sublime, but which nevertheless points to an ambiguity in the latter. Does Kant consider the sublime feeling to be pleasurable because it makes us realise that our moral principles can’t be affected by sensuous nature or because it makes us feel that the moral subject is superior and invulnerable? It will turn out that for Kant and Schiller these insights necessarily go hand in hand. Freedom and morality are inextricably bound up with each other through the notion of rationality. Arthur Schopenhauer will abandon this assumption and thus make room for a more plausible view that is expressed by Friedrich Nietzsche early on in his career: It is not the subject, but the object that is sublime.

1 Friedrich Schiller and the Separation of the Aesthetic and the Ethical

Friedrich Schiller is famous for being a thinker of freedom, which is apparent in his plays as well as in his theoretical writings. This is the reason why he attaches so much importance to the sublime experience, which makes us conscious of our moral freedom as rational creatures. In his early text Vom Erhabenen, Schiller explains that the sublime feeling necessarily originates from the contrast between two moments. We can only become aware of our superior rational nature if we have first experienced our powerlessness as sensuous beings.1 As sensuous beings, we are dependent on the external

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1 Friedrich Schiller, Vom Erhabenen, in Theoretische Schriften, ed. Rolf-Peter Janz (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2008), 395. In this paper, I will refer to this text as “VE.”
world and hence fundamentally vulnerable. In times of prosperity, however, we are not aware of this dependency. Therefore, it is only when our sensuous desires get frustrated that we can become conscious of the fact that our rational nature cannot be affected by the vicissitudes of fortune.2

Following Kant, Schiller makes a distinction between two types of sublime experiences which is based on the kind of frustration that is involved.3 In the mathematical or theoretical fourth sublime, we experience a frustration of the power of the imagination, which leads to the revelation of the superiority of reason: The more we realise that the imagination doesn’t manage to represent the infinite as a totality, the more we realise that reason is able to think about the latter. By contrast, in the dynamical or practical sublime we experience a frustration of our sensuous being as a whole: The more we understand that we cannot maintain our natural existence, the more we come to see that the faculty of reason succeeds in maintaining its independence from the course of natural events.

Whereas Kant gives more attention to the mathematical sublime, Schiller considers the dynamical sublime to be more valuable.5 Schiller explains that, in the mathematical sublime, we only experience a superiority over something that is located within the subject: The faculty of reason is more powerful than the faculty of the imagination. In the practical sublime, by contrast, we experience that we are superior to something which exists outside the subject. Our entire sensuous being cannot maintain itself because it depends on the external world. The faculty of reason, however, functions independently from our sensuous being, and consequently it can’t be vulnerable to external influences either. In other words, the practical sublime is deemed to be more valuable because in this experience there seems to be more at stake. Furthermore, Schiller believes that the dynamical sublime is manifested most ideally in tragedy: Tragedies are able to reveal the nothingness of our sensuous nature while at the same time demonstrating the possibility of transcending this vulnerable condition as rational beings. Consequently, Schiller’s text Über das Pathetische, which can be read as a sequel to Vom Erhabenen, discusses the sublime experience from the perspective of tragedy (in contrast to the works of Kant, which famously only apply the concept of the sublime to the experience of natural objects).

2 ve, 397.
3 Ibid., 396.
4 Schiller uses the terms “theoretical” and “practical” instead of “mathematical” or “dynamical.”
5 ve, 398.