



Aesthetics and Philosophy of Arts

Philosophical Beauty: The Sublime in the Beautiful in Kant's Third *Critique* and Aristotle's *Poetics*

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ABSTRACT: I argue that Kant's analysis of the experience of the beautiful in the third *Critique* entails an implicit or potential experience of the sublime, that is, the sublime as he himself describes it. Finding the sublime in the beautiful is what I call philosophical beauty. I then consider some aspects of Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*, specifically his identification of the key elements of tragedy as those involving the experience of fear and pity, which leads to a catharsis of these emotions. Aristotle is famously unclear about what happens in this process of catharsis. I use the notion of philosophical beauty derived from Kant to suggest a possible explanation.

There is beauty and there is beauty. The two are not mutually exclusive, but rather represent two poles on a continuum. At one pole is the beauty that is associated with a sense of lightness and balanced order. It has a faintly decorative quality to it. At the other extreme is the much darker form of beauty that we associate with profundity and truth. This latter form of beauty I will analyze in terms of the containment of the sublime. The distinction between these two extremes of beauty has less to do with the objects under consideration, whether a flower, a sunset, a poem, a painting, or a piece of music, than it does with the attitude of the considerer of the object. That is, anything that possesses beauty of the first kind can also be viewed as possessing beauty of the second kind, if the attention of the viewer is directed appropriately. The differential across the continuum is constituted by the degree of awareness of the element of the sublime in the beautiful.

This second kind of beauty, that which is associated with depth and truth, is not a form of beauty that fits into Kant's categories of the beautiful and the sublime as he lays those categories out in the *Critique of Judgement*. I will argue that Kant's analysis of the concepts of the beautiful and the sublime yields a more complex conception of beauty than Kant himself ever articulated and I call this more complex conception of beauty philosophical beauty. I will conclude with some considerations that connect this revision of Kant's analysis of beauty with some of Aristotle's remarks on the nature of tragedy.

In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant contrasts the sublime and the beautiful. What it is that is beautiful for us in the beautiful Kant calls *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, 'purposiveness without purpose'. (1) I will explain what I think Kant means by this. The categories of the

understanding are organizing principles, they organize the sensory manifold into the usable structures of the world that we move among and employ every day. To find something useful in the world--that is, structured in a way that the organization of the thing suits both our understanding and some need of ours--is pleasurable for us. We enjoy the purposive form of a well-made hammer, for example, because of the use we know we could make of it. In the case of beauty, we identify the same pattern of purposiveness in an object, we recognize and appreciate a principle of organization, one might even say, of thought, in the object, but the object itself has no human use. Something is beautiful, as opposed to useful, precisely because it has certain characteristics that we can identify with usefulness, but the object itself is useless. It is because of that fact that our stance with respect to the beautiful object is strictly disinterested, even while its aspect of purposiveness gives us pleasure. A flower is beautiful because we can recognize its organization, its symmetry, its colors as useful characteristics in a thing and this pleases us, but the thing itself is essentially useless to us, and so we call it beautiful. It possesses *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, purposiveness without purpose.

The sublime, by contrast, according to Kant, is a principle of disorder, of purposivelessness. It is the phenomenon of our understanding encountering something which it cannot organize or contain. It cannot determine a delimiting organizing principle in the thing because it cannot determine any limits to the thing. It cannot determine any limits to the thing because the thing defies the presentative powers of the imagination. It is beyond the powers of the imagination to present a sensible form to the understanding, and it is beyond the powers of the understanding to make sense out of nothing. Both of those faculties seem to fail us in the confrontation with the sublime. The sublime, therefore, represents for us disorganization. This disorganization is not just an external arbitrary disorganization, but one that suggests an internal, systemic disorganization, because it is from our own inability to organize this thing that we perceive that the sense of disorganization arises. That is threatening to our conception of ourselves as organized and organizing things. It is something frightening.

Kant identifies beauty with a quality, namely purposiveness, but the sublime he identifies with a quantity, and that quantity is unlimited. Where beauty, according to Kant, is calming, the sublime disrupts us, disturbs us. The purposiveness of the beautiful is, as Kant describes it, "preadaptable to our judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction." (2) But the purposivelessness of the sublime is just the opposite: it seems "to violate purpose in respect of the judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty." (3) To encounter the sublime, Kant says, "does violence to the imagination." (4)

The pleasure that we get from the sublime Kant refers to as "negative pleasure." It is an indirect pleasure that comes not from the sublime itself, but from the relief we feel when we realize that this external disorder does not really threaten our internal order; when we recognize an alternative purposiveness, identified by reason, that is independent of all worldly threats, namely, what Kant refers to as our "supersensible destination," (5) which is to be good, i.e., moral. Kant says at the beginning of section 27, "The feeling of our incapacity to attain to an idea *which is a law for us is respect.*" That is, the confrontation with the unthinkable in the sublime recalls to us our inadequacy and compulsion to make ourselves adequate to the idea of the moral law. Hence the sublime compels us to acknowledge an alternative purpose for us from that purpose which is susceptible to the dangers of the world, namely, to be moral. With respect to *that* purpose, this object poses no threat whatsoever, hence we are able to regard the object disinterestedly. The pleasure we get derives from the recognition of our essential safety with respect to the threatening

thing. Kant describes the pleasure of the sublime as a kind of joy, he says, "the pleasurable arising from the cessation of an uneasiness is *a state of joy*." (6)

Kant compares the sublime and the beautiful in the following way, "We must seek a ground external to ourselves for the beautiful of nature, but seek it for the sublime merely in ourselves and in our attitude of thought, which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature." (7) The beautiful turns us outward, while the sublime is a turning inward. For Kant, this makes the experience of the sublime a secondary aesthetic experience to that of beauty. (8) It makes the sublime secondary to beauty apparently because the experience of beauty is expansive, pointing outward to the purposiveness of nature, while the sublime simply points us back into our own inner purposiveness, a phenomenon that Kant seems to regard as inherently less interesting. My concern is specifically with the way that the experience of the sublime leads us inward and how it leads to a particular form of reflection, a form of reflection that is connected with the more purely philosophical project of self-knowledge.

For Kant neither art nor nature (in the positive, purposive sense) are the proper objects of the sublime, but only, as he says, "rude nature." (9) I will argue, however, that many more kinds of things, from flowers to sunsets, poems to melodies, can be sources of the feeling of the sublime. And second, as I have suggested, I disagree with Kant that the sublime is of secondary importance as an aesthetic experience, although I take its most forceful presentation to be in conjunction with the beautiful.

There is, however, a relation between the beautiful and the sublime that Kant does not refer to but is contained in his own analysis of these two concepts. If we accept Kant's description of what beauty is, that it is *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*, or purposiveness without purpose, then we can establish a definite connection between beauty and the sublime. The distinguishing feature of beauty, for Kant, is the quality of purposiveness. But the whole of beauty, for Kant, is purposiveness without purpose. If the quality of beauty is purposiveness, then the essence of beauty must be that it is without purpose. That is, what beauty shares with other things that are pleasing to us is purposiveness, but what distinguishes beauty is that an object has this quality of purposiveness but is without a purpose, hence what makes beauty beauty is not purposiveness, though that is necessary, but something's ultimately being without a purpose.

If a thing is for us really without a purpose, then it is for us really purposeless and so purposeless. An object of beauty for us, then, will have the quality of purposiveness, but further reflection will show it to be really purposeless. The concept of purposelessness I associate, as does Kant somewhat more indirectly, (10) with the sublime. To get to the sublime from the beautiful, then, one must confront this essential feature of the beautiful, namely, its ultimate purposelessness. When we are forced to confront what is for us real purposelessness it is a confrontation with something which our mind cannot organize or contain or make sense of. Our mind, our imagination, extends, but it can determine no boundaries. Its own integrity gets threatened, we are threatened. It will be a feeling of some close, very real, but unseen and unspecifiable danger. When the mind works to defend itself against this danger, when it reflects, reframes, stands back, as it were, which is to say, when reason is engaged, the feeling is one of relief, of the cessation of the threat. The subsequent feeling is a feeling of joy. It is the experience of the sublime in the beautiful.

It seems clear to me that one can experience the beautiful without the sublime. To be impressed and pleased by the light and color, the harmony and proportions in a painting by

Matisse, to experience, say, its purposiveness, its order, is a good experience and a sufficient one. To get to the sublime from here takes an extra effort, a kind of internal probing, and, inevitably, a confrontation with an ultimate purposivelessness. Some painters and poets, it seems to me, work harder than others to elicit the experience of the sublime from out of the experience of the beautiful, such as, for example, Cezanne or Baudelaire. Just as certainly, one can experience the unmitigated sublime, especially in the forms found in nature suggested by Kant--in powerful waterfalls and overhanging rocks. (11)

It is when the aesthetic experience of the beautiful initiates a certain pattern of reflection, a pattern of reflection that begins with a sense of order and harmony, but becomes a kind of search for a meaningful context for this order and harmony that the contemplation of the beautiful moves toward an experience of the sublime. The search for a context for this order and harmony is a search for a context for the human, for our own purposiveness and so becomes a search for oneself, for one's own place. This becomes a philosophical search that ends in the experience of the sublime; it is only then that the aesthetic experience approaches the philosophical. It is philosophical because the end is no longer simply delight, but something like truth, the truth about ourselves and our place in the universe.

The purposiveness of beauty, then, can seduce us into a search for truer meanings than the ones we have come to rely on and take for granted. This confrontation with the sublime in the beautiful is disruptive, but also liberating. What it disrupts is the complacency of our dispositions to disregard. What it liberates us to is to a new sensitivity to our own lives and to the lives of those around us. These aspects of fear and joy, of disruption and liberation that can be construed from this revision of Kant's analysis of the beautiful and the sublime connect this idea of the sublime in the beautiful with Aristotle's notions of fear and pity in tragedy, and the end of tragedy as catharsis.

While much has been made of it, there is just one passing reference to catharsis in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It appears in the following definitional passage on tragedy:

A tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having a magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories. . . with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of these emotions. (12)

I want to suggest that this definition of the nature of tragedy by Aristotle has many connections with what I have been referring to as philosophical beauty, as I have construed it from Kant's analysis of the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful.

In addressing the question, "What are the conditions on which the tragic effect depends?" Aristotle specifies as one condition that the protagonist of the tragedy must be neither too good nor too bad, but rather "one like ourselves" in order to arouse the proper mixture of fear and pity. (13) In experiencing a tragedy, we feel fear because we see ourselves in the place of the protagonist, and we feel pity at the undeservedness of the misfortune that that person suffers. It is a kind of mirroring in which we see something of ourselves in the protagonist. How this identification with the protagonist and the experience of fear and pity result in catharsis, Aristotle does not make clear, but an analysis of the Kantian sublime may shed light on the phenomenon.

In Kant's analysis of the sublime there is a similar, if more complex, kind of mirroring that occurs, a mirroring that results in a similar transition from pity and fear to joyful release. In

our experience of the beautiful, for Kant, the purposiveness we find in nature is really a projection of our own inner purposiveness. This reflection of ourselves in nature makes nature appear beautiful to us. (14) Similarly, when we encounter in nature nature as unsubsumable to thought, nature as purposivelessness, we see ourselves reflected in this phenomenon and so fear for our own purposivelessness.

The nature that we encounter in the sublime is a different nature from the one we encounter in the beautiful. It is nature, as Kant says, "as the small things about which we are solicitous." (15) It is the nature toward which our many hypothetical imperatives aim. The identification with this nature confronts us with, as Kant says, "our own impotence." (16)

That is, for Kant, our confrontation and identification with illimitable nature causes in us extreme anxiety, say, fear and pity, about our own purposelessness. But this is itself purposive because this confrontation compels us to seek a different account of our own purpose than simply the one susceptible to presentation by the imagination, namely, the one which ties us to our day to day routines in search of daily satisfactions, "the small things about which we are solicitous." Reason identifies, as it were, a larger narrative to which our lives belong, hence this very real danger of our ultimate impotence with respect to the satisfaction of our daily desires, is not a danger to the larger narrative of our lives, which, for Kant, is to be moral. This realization leads to a release from the anxiety and a consequent sense of joy.

Similarly, in Aristotle's analysis of tragedy, through our identification with the protagonist of the tragedy we are led to a state of fear and pity by virtue of our concern for, our identification with, the protagonist as caught in the daily unknown and unknowable assaults that plague us. By virtue of the mechanisms of peripety and discovery we are able to recognize the *hamartia*, or fatal flaw, of the protagonist, which is just the protagonist's preoccupation with, and vulnerability to, the daily known and unknown assaults that plague us, the protagonist's solicitude of "the little things." This recognition is the result of reflection, the engagement of reason which allows us to transcend our identification with the protagonist and to see a higher, independent narrative for our own lives, which, for Aristotle, means *eudaimonia* based on virtue.

There is, in the world, considerable pressure to develop dispositions of disregard. That is, the larger narrative of our lives must be disregarded in favor of the smaller and more varied narratives of quotidian demands: what must be done to get a raise, to buy a house, to feed and secure a family. Aristotle and Kant both describe a similar aesthetic experience that seems to transcend these dispositions. It is an experience of a release that results in a pleasure that is somehow edifying and is connected to an awareness of some kind of higher purpose to our lives that is revealed by reason. In both cases the experience entails a confrontation with extreme anxiety that yields to a feeling of release and pleasure, which Kant calls joy. I describe this experience in terms of a transcendence, a transcendence of our dispositions to disregard in favor of a kind of sensitivity and openness to the larger structure of our lives. Neither Aristotle nor Kant describes the aesthetic experience of beauty or of art in just this way, yet an analysis of each of their theories of certain aesthetic phenomena yields, it seems to me, an account of a specific kind of aesthetic experience captured by neither but entailed by both, and that experience I describe as being that of the sublime in the beautiful or, simply, philosophical beauty.

Notes

(1) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1951), e.g., §§V-VIII & §17. My understanding of this concept of beauty in Kant comes primarily from Ted Cohen, e.g., see his, "Why Beauty is a Symbol of Morality," in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, edited by Ted Cohen & Paul Guyer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 221-236.

(2) *Ibid*, 83.

(3) *Ibid*.

(4) *Ibid*.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 97.

(6) *Ibid*, p. 100.
or rich in consequences as the concept of the beautiful...." *Ibid*.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 84.

(8) As Kant says, "Hence, we see that the concept of the sublime is not nearly so important

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

(10) Kant refers to an object of the sublime as being "unpurposive". *Ibid.*, p. 121.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

(12) Aristotle, *De Poetica*, (1449b24-28), translated by Ingram Bywater. In *Introduction to Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon, (New York: The Modern Library, 1947), p. 631.

(13) *Ibid.*, (1452b27-1453a8) p. 639.

(14) "Although our concept of a subjective purposiveness of nature in its forms according to empirical laws is not a concept of the object, but only a principle of the judgment for furnishing itself with concepts amid the immense variety of nature (and thus being able to ascertain its own position), yet we thus ascribe to nature, as it were, a regard to our cognitive faculty according to the analogy of purpose. Thus we can regard *natural beauty* as the *presentation* of the concept of the formal (merely subjective) purposiveness, and *natural purpose* as the presentation of the concept of a real (objective) purposiveness." *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

(15) The whole passage reads, "In this way nature is not judged to be sublime in our aesthetical judgments in so far as it excites fear, but because it calls up that power in us (which is not nature) of regarding as small the things about which we are solicitous (goods, health, and life), and of regarding its might (to which we are no doubt subjected in respect of these things) as nevertheless without any dominion over us and our personality to which we must bow where our highest fundamental propositions, and their assertion or abandonment, are concerned." Kant, p. 101.

(16) *Ibid*.