Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?

The aesthetic notion of the sublime has had a great deal of attention in the last decade or so, engendering monographs by Paul Crowther, Jean-François Lyotard, and Kirk Pillow, critical anthologies from Dabney Townsend and from Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, and numerous journal articles, conference panels, and symposia. This renewal of interest is perhaps timely: a notion that conjures up the inexplicable, the overwhelming, and the horrendous may be well suited to the current age. It is perhaps also timely that we take a step back from this respectable and growing body of research to attend to a single voice that once asked a very important question: “How is a theory of the sublime possible?” Guy Sircello was concerned that our efforts to capture and explain the sublime have in fact resulted in claims that are either contradictory or incoherent, due to tensions between (often unarticulated) epistemological and ontological commitments. He also sought to remedy the very problem he posed, with suggestions as to how a coherent theory of the sublime should proceed.

The present article takes up the problem as Sircello first voiced it, but without his final optimism. What I offer amounts to an error theory: our current theorizing about the sublime rests on a mistake. I will claim that if we accept the problem as Sircello had described it, his own proposed solution is bound to fail. But if we reject his general methodological assumptions, what we will be left with is so limited that a general theory of the sublime will remain out of our reach. Additionally, I will expand on the evidence Sircello garnered for his case by attending in some detail to the most sophisticated treatment of the sublime we have: that of Immanuel Kant’s work in the third Critique.

I. THE PROBLEM OF THE SUBLIME

But first, the problem itself. Sircello took as his starting point the generally accepted notion that sublime experience “professes to ‘see’ beyond human powers of knowledge and description” and that because of this it is inaccessible to rational thought (p. 541). Further, in the descriptions of the sublime he canvassed, Sircello found the operation of a general assumption that our cognitive powers are revealed, in the moment, to have what he called “radically limited access” to some broadly construed notion of “reality” (p. 543). There is a great deal of prima facie evidence for this general claim. Sircello mined such sources as the Tao, Zen Buddhism, and the poetry of Wordsworth and the Romantics, but philosophers writing on the sublime provide similar evidence, and it is with philosophical theory that I am most concerned. Consider the following.

1. Joseph Addison wrote in the Spectator of 1812 that “our imagination loves to be filled with an object, or to grasp at anything that is too big for its capacity.”
2. The Earl of Shaftesbury rhapsodized about the sublimity of nature in this way: “Thy being is boundless, unsearchable; impenetrable. In thy immensity all thought is lost; fancy gives over its flight: and wearied imagination spends itself in vain.”
3. Edmund Burke claimed that the passion caused by the sublime is astonishment, “and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended. . . . The mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any
other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it."

4. In the twentieth century, Jean-François Lyotard famously wrote of the postmodern as truly sublime, that which “puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself . . . that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.”

In each of these cases, as with others, we grasp at and fail to achieve an understanding of some notion of “reality.” This is Sircello’s main premise: that sublime experience embodies a certain kind of cognitive failure. In these moments we become aware of our limitations; whatever we construe this broad notion of reality to be, it remains tantalizingly out of reach. This experience generates, for Sircello, the first of two themes he identified as running through the majority of sublime discourse, the theme of “epistemological transcendence” (p. 542), which he articulated in the following proposition.

An experience of the sublime presents the object of the experience, i.e., the sublime, as epistemologically inaccessible. (p. 545)

At first glance, this is not a contentious thesis: much writing about sublime experience seems to suggest that what is unique is just this moment of being overwhelmed by a sense of something incomprehensible, or incommensurable, or more powerful than we are. And, of course, to be made aware of the limitations of our cognitive capacities is at the same time to transcend them, insofar as we reflect on them. This is another powerful motif in writing on the sublime that I will return to below.

Sircello’s concern was that this initial theme of epistemological transcendence tends to embody a second theme that leads us into difficulty. The first theme interprets “the experience of the sublime” as denoting an experience of an object, although it leaves open the question of what this object might be, or whether it indeed exists (p. 545), referring instead to “reality” at large. The second theme, what Sircello called “ontological transcendence,” addresses this object directly and suggests that sublime experience represents something as existing that is inaccessible to our cognitive powers, something “on a level of being . . . which transcends that of humankind and all of humankind’s possible environments” (p. 545). After all, he went on to say, it is implausible to assert that we have an experience, called sublime, that is without any object, or that the sublime is both an object of experience and one that does not exist (p. 545). However, to imply that an epistemologically inaccessible object does exist, Sircello claimed, is to end in either incoherence or contradiction, and cause any attempts at a theory to fail. Let me take each of these charges in turn.

Regarding the charge of incoherence, we must ask how we can have an experience—and describe that experience—which presents an object that is in no way epistemologically accessible. This would be tantamount, Sircello noted, to having a visual experience of an invisible object: impossible (p. 546). Consider James Usher, a contemporary of Burke’s, who wrote:

Because the philosophers of our days can assign no form, nor size, nor color, to the object of their sublime awe, they conclude it to be vain and superstitious. . . . The truth is, the impression of this obscure presence . . . is beyond the verge of the philosophy of the ideas of sense. The disciples of this philosophy . . . are not able to conceive that an object has been there which was not represented by a sensible idea, and which makes itself felt only by its influence.

For Usher, we have an experience of an existent object that is inaccessible to our very modes of experiencing, as with Shaftsbury’s earlier allusion to boundlessness and impenetrability. This is the incoherence with which Sircello was concerned.

However, sublime discourse that does not make incoherent claims falls into contradiction instead. Let me return to Addison for a moment: he lists among the objects of sublime experience “a vast uncultivated desert,” “huge heaps of mountains, high rocks and precipices, or a wide expance of waters.” Burke widens this list to include “serpents and poisonous animals of all kinds,” and many in the Longinian tradition count poetry, architecture, and painting as candidates for the sublime, just as Lyotard included in his scope works of art and literature. For the most part, a long tradition of writing on the sublime has clearly described the objects of our experiences. Sircello reminds us that to do so, however, is consistently not to treat these objects as if they were epistemologically inaccessible (p. 546). Rocks and mountains are not
things we do not comprehend or cannot comprehend; we would not describe them if we did not have access to them. When we do identify them as sublime objects, we are not treating them as, at the same time, inaccessible to rational thought. So we fall into contradiction: the sublime object is both transcendent and familiar.

On Sircello's diagnosis, we seem forced to concede that sublime discourse, so long as it embodies both these theses, is either incoherent or contradictory. This is a pressing problem if we seek to find in the sublime anything of philosophical interest. Theorists who wish to emphasize the transcendence of the sublime object are faced with the problem of explaining how we can actually have and describe an experience of it, as in the case of Usher. But theorists who wish to emphasize the experience itself as transcendent must somehow tell us what it is an experience of, if it is not to be a mere fantasy or hallucination. Telling us that it is an unusual experience of a usual object—a rock, a cliff, a storm, and so on—contradicts the first thesis with the second. The heart of the problem, then, is this: if we focus on the metaphysical status of the sublime object, our epistemology becomes problematic, but if we address instead the epistemological transcendence of a certain experience, we still seem forced to make some metaphysical claim about the object of that experience. The theme of epistemological transcendence, as Sircello interpreted it, provides indirect evidence for the second theme of ontological transcendence, with which it appears to be inextricably bound, and this seems to imply that, in fact, nothing can be sublime.

Can we overcome this problem and speak coherently about sublimity in some way? Sircello left a hint that we perhaps could if we can find a way to reinterpret the first theme so that it does not embody the second. For it is the first—that general notion that sublime experience somehow overwhelms our cognitive faculties—that has generated such interest in the topic. And it is the second—the ontological claim—that has been at the heart of the conceptual problems I have outlined. Sircello proposed that we attempt a weaker reading of the thesis of epistemological transcendence to exclude any metaphysical postulation. He argued that "epistemological transcendence may not presuppose any ontology and may not directly concern 'the real' at all, but only the limitations of our attempts to grasp it, whatever it is or is taken to be" (p. 540). Our mistake lay in assuming we were talking about some kind of object of experience and in attaching the quality of sublimity to that. Sircello concluded his paper with a proposed rearticulation of the thesis of epistemological transcendence, as follows: "for any possible given set of routes of epistemological access to reality, that set is insufficient to grasp the real and that in the moment of sublime experience we are perhaps made aware of this" (p. 540). It is this revised proposition I will turn to now.

II. THE KANTIAN SUBLIME

Kant becomes an interesting thinker in this regard, for he was notoriously coy about making any kind of metaphysical claim about the nature of the real. His most striking innovation on earlier thinkers was to move the locus of the sublime from a property of an object (whether natural or supernatural) to a feeling experienced by the knowing subject. This seems to indicate a focus on the epistemology of the experience, as Sircello had proposed. At first glance, Kant's work appears most likely to lead us out of the problems as presented, and therefore merits a more thorough consideration.

Kant states at the beginning of the "Analytic of the Sublime" that "we express ourselves incorrectly if we call any object of nature sublime . . . All that we can say is that the object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found in the mind, for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called" (§23, pp. 83–84).10 And, more strongly, that "Nichts also, was Gegenstand der Sinne sein kann, is, auf diesen Fuß betrachtet, erhaben zu nennen; [nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is, considered on this basis, to be called sublime]" (§24, p. 88).11 For all that Kant remains within the tradition in his mention of such familiar natural examples as "shapeless mountains piled in wild despair," "the gloomy, raging sea," "and 'crude nature' in general, he explicitly departs from earlier thinkers in denying that any of these things themselves are sublime objects of our experiences (§26, pp. 95, 91). Similarly, while in his discussion of the mathematical sublime he refers to seemingly inaccessible objects that are "boundless," "formless," and "absolutely great," or that bring with them "the idea of infinity," he again denies that these are sublime, for all that they occasion the feeling of sublimity in us when we confront them (§23, p. 82; §25, p. 86; §26, p. 94). His starting point thus seems to
reject Sirceelo’s first interpretation of epistemological transcendence in favor of something approaching the second. What is sublime for Kant is not something in the world—some portion of the “real” that we directly experience—but a feeling we have that is occasioned by certain sensory experiences.

Let us look at this feeling of sublimity more closely. Kant, in these sections, is not merely providing a phenomenology of certain kinds of experiences and the emotional charge we get from them. His interest is very much in epistemological transcendence: the mechanism by which we realize our cognitive limitations and the positive (moral) implications of this realization. With the mathematical sublime, for instance, which we experience when faced with vast and formless objects, the faculty of imagination cannot apprehend them as a whole in a single intuition as reason demands. This incommensurability of our imagination with the totalizing demands of reason produces at first a displeasure in our experience of failure and then a subsequent pleasure that is aroused by “the feeling of a supersensible faculty”—our awareness of the superiority of our powers of reason. It is this “state of mind [Geistestimmung],” he notes, “and not the object, that is to be called sublime [nicht aber das Object erhaben zu nennen]” (§ 25, pp. 88–89).12

Kant seems to suggest in these passages that, in the moment, we become aware of a part of us that transcends the natural world. As Malcolm Budd has put it, our ability to think, for example, the infinite as a whole “is possible only because we possess a supersensible faculty . . . Accordingly, sublimity attaches only to the supersensible basis of human nature.”13 Kant writes that the failures of imagination in these moments nevertheless “carry our concept of nature to a supersensible substrate” that lies both at its basis and “also at the basis of our faculty of thought” (§ 26, p. 94). The sublime, then, is more than a feeling; it is an awareness of a part of ourselves that surpasses understanding: “Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden Maßstab der Sinne übertrifft [the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense]” (§ 25, p. 89).14

This is equally clear in the sections on the dynamical sublime, in which we experience the force of nature without ourselves being in physical danger. The sight of storms, hurricanes, volcanoes, and other natural forces “exhibit our faculty of resistance as insignificantly small in comparison with their might” (§ 28, p. 100). Nevertheless, this sense of powerlessness leads us to discover in ourselves “a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind”: that of our moral superiority (§ 28, p. 101). The sublime, Kant notes, “calls up a power in us (which is not nature)” but allows us to see that nature has no dominion over us, for all that it can overwhelm our physical strength (§ 28, p. 101). We become aware in that moment that while we may physically perish in a raging sea, there is a part of us that cannot be touched, even by the most violent of natural forces. That part of us—our moral being—is “disclosed,” or “emerges,” or “is found” in our sensory experience of certain natural phenomena.

What is truly sublime, then, is not an object of experience: it is an object of thought.

In his General Remark at the end of the “Analytic of the Sublime,” Kant recapitulates his position. Ideas of reason, he reminds us, cannot be presented to the senses, and the failure of the imagination in the face of the sublime is due to its efforts to “make the representation of the senses adequate to these [ideas]” (§ 29, p. 108). But this failure, this effort on the part of the imagination “forces us . . . to think nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible.” We become aware, thereby, of something that surpasses nature and all our attempts at capturing it. “It is by this that we are reminded,” Kant writes, “that we only have to do with nature as a phenomenon and that it must be regarded as the mere presentation of a nature in itself (of which reason has the idea) . . . [T]his idea of the supersensible . . . is awakened in us” by the experience of the sublime and “this judgment is based upon a feeling of the mind’s destination, which entirely surpasses the realm of [the natural world]” (§ 29, pp. 108–109).

The dual movement of the mind—from a sense of our cognitive limitations to the transcendence of them—has little direct application, for Kant, to shapeless mountains and violent storms. These phenomena may provide the catalyst for epistemological transcendence but they are not the direct objects of sublime experience. The real point of these experiences is the realization of our own supersensible nature, a realization that occurs, as Malcolm Budd has noted, “only by conceiving of the sensible world of experience as being dependent on its intelligible basis, the world as it is in itself, thus making manifest . . . our status as a causa
noumenon.” These myriad natural phenomena provide the occasions for our experiences but the real object of the sublime is us.\textsuperscript{16}

The innovative aspect of Kant’s discussion has been in moving the locus of the sublime from objects of the natural world to the subject of experience, but in doing so, Kant has not avoided metaphysical postulation, as Sircello had hoped, for he has resituated the transcendent object as well: what unfolds as truly sublime is our moral being, that part of us that is inaccessible to sensory experience but that we nevertheless become aware of in (certain) moments of cognitive failure. In the \textit{Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals}, Kant makes this ontological commitment clear: we “ascribe a certain sublimity and dignity to the person who fulfills all his [moral] duties. For though there is no sublimity in him so far as he is subject to the moral law, \textit{yet he is sublime} in so far as he is a giver of the law and subject to it for this reason only.”\textsuperscript{17} Again, in the \textit{Critique of Practical Reason} Kant refers to the “sublimity of our own supersensuous existence [\textit{die Erhabenheit unserer eigenen übersinnlichen Existenz}]”; it is an awareness of the transcendent self as moral legislator that sublime experience was getting at all along.\textsuperscript{18}

To be sure, Kant’s account does not suffer from the incoherence in Sircello’s first formulation of epistemological transcendence because Kant is not claiming that we have direct sensory experience of a transcendent object. But, while not incoherent, Kant’s account shows us that the theme of ontological transcendence persists through Sircello’s second articulation of the epistemological thesis. This formulation suggested that for any given set of routes of epistemological access to reality, that set is insufficient to grasp the real. We can see that this articulation still embodies an ontological claim: it represents something as existing that is inaccessible to our cognitive faculties but to which our experience of sublimity is directed. For all that Sircello sought to escape the problem by focusing on the epistemology of sublime experience, it seems that we cannot do this without bringing along some notion of the real, however this notion is construed. Kant’s conception of sublimity, for all that it, too, focuses on the epistemological aspects of our experience, still carries with it an ontological claim about (transcendent) reality. With Sircello’s second formulation, we escape incoherence only to find ourselves facing some ineffable or mysterious reality that we do not experience directly, that we cannot know, but that nevertheless we must posit as existing, of which the sublime gives us a glimmer. This revision of the original thesis does not succeed in omitting the theme of ontological transcendence: instead, as we see with the case of Kant, it renders the ontology all the more mysterious and all the more tantalizingly out of reach.

\section*{III. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF A THEORY OF THE SUBLIME}

Where does this discussion leave us regarding the possibility of a theory of the sublime? I will use this final section to canvas our options, and to make the negative argument that a theory of the sublime as it has been historically formulated is simply not possible. There are three immediate directions open before us in light of the forgoing.

First, we can simply accept Kant’s account as the only way to generate a coherent theory of the sublime. Sircello, we can say, aptly revised his epistemological thesis to meet earlier problems of contradiction and incoherence, even if he was mistaken in his optimism that this revision would omit any metaphysics (Sircello, curiously, did not mention Kant in his paper). But to accept Kant’s account is possible only if we accept the entire Kantian system; the particular kind of cognitive failure we see with the mathematical sublime, for instance, rests on the Kantian theory of what constitutes cognitive success: that of the imagination being able to synthesize sensory experience for the purposes of determinant judgment. The true sublime object can only be a Kantian postulate about our moral being. If we go this route, the sublime becomes nothing more than evidence for—or a symptom of—Kant’s whole architectonic. It may be the result of an (aesthetic) reflective judgment, but it is no longer a truly aesthetic concept and has peripheral use in aesthetic theory (although it may become of interest for ethics). This means that any account of the sublime we may seek to provide will be part of an interpretation of the Kantian system only; at best, we may be forced to admit that a theory of the sublime will be incoherent without at minimum a commitment to Kantian terminology. This conclusion may not be dire: a focus on judgments of sublimity may help illuminate Kant’s moral theory. But I suggest that such an outcome would be unsatisfying for the many aesthetic theorists who have sought to rejuvenate the notion and claim it as their purview.
A second option is to further investigate Sir-cello’s revised thesis in the hope that a wholly epistemological account of the sublime is possible. Kant, we can say, was wrong to link the requisite cognitive failure to moral transcendence. Instead, we can perhaps retain the notion of sublimity as a pleasure that results from cognitive failure without his moral conclusions. This is the route Malcolm Budd seems to have taken. He is critical of Kant’s formulation of the sublime, claiming that it “appears to be no more than a product of his inveterate tendency to evaluate everything by reference to moral value… a tendency that led him to moralize, in one way or another, any experience he valued.”\(^{19}\) If we reject the moralizing aspect of the Kantian account, a much more modest picture of the sublime emerges. The initial negative aspect of the experience remains an awareness of the inadequacy of our imagination or physical strength in the face of certain natural phenomena, but the final movement of the mind, rather than reaching toward some transcendent truth about our natures that we feel but cannot know, emerges directly from this experience of inadequacy. Budd has described it this way:

With the sudden dropping away… of our everyday sense of the importance of our self and its numerous concerns and projects, or the normal sense of the security of our body from external natural forces, the heightened awareness of our manifest vulnerability and insignificance… is, after the initial shock, experienced with pleasure.\(^{20}\)

This more modest interpretation of cognitive failure ends with an awareness of our vulnerability and humility; we are humbled in the face of natural phenomena that are either so vast as to preclude measure, or so powerful that we cannot withstand them. We realize our limitations at these times of cognitive failure, and this realization brings with it a certain pleasure (what Burke and Kant have both termed a “negative” pleasure).

Such an account seems more in keeping with the generally accepted notion of the sublime as a moment of being overwhelmed by a sense of things as incomprehensible, or more powerful than we are, but it stops short of claiming any transcendence attendant upon this moment (or at best a very thin notion of transcendence as the result of our realization of our own limitations). But we can ask of Budd’s account why these moments of cognitive failure must be restricted to experiences that follow the general outlines of the Kantian mathematical and dynamical sublime. We have already given up the idea that sublimity resides in objects of experience as being contradictory if they are natural objects and incoherent if they are not. If we now reject the moment of moral transcendence that the sublime is meant to engender, as we reject the Kantian conception altogether, is the field not left wide open for any encounters that likewise humble us or draw attention to our vulnerability? Is this not what Lyotard had in mind for powerful works of art, for instance? Or, more prosaically, what of the cognitive failure I have occasionally experienced in the face of the New York Times crossword puzzle, or complex mathematical problems that truly humble me? What of the rush athletes experience from dangerous sports such as ice-climbing or heli-skiing? What of the vulnerability I feel when riding my bicycle in rush-hour traffic and making it—just—home safely? Why are these sorts of experiences not also sublime or, at any rate, equal candidates for the kind of pleasure that a subjective account would properly call sublime? Budd’s rejection of Kant’s moral goals causes us to lose the initial reasons for focusing on the vast, formless, and threatening aspects of nature alone.

Indeed, if we seek a purely epistemological account of the sublime, must we not dismiss any reference to Kant’s so-called dynamical experiences altogether? For these were not moments of cognitive failure \textit{per se} but instead experiences of our physical vulnerability in the face of (natural) forces we \textit{can} cognize but cannot withstand. On Budd’s reading, it seems that anything \textit{at all} could engender an experience of the sublime, provided that it overwhelms our cognitive capacities. This is why I have called his account “subjective,” for it seems that the relevant experiences will be unique to the particular cognitive abilities of a given individual (\textit{you} may have no difficulty with the crossword puzzle, for instance). But again, even this minimal reading will not work, for there remains an object of experience that causes cognitive failure, and any attempt to describe or delimit this object will lead to by now familiar problems.

This second option is also unsatisfying for a further reason. Why, we can ask, does the awareness of our cognitive limitations lead to \textit{pleasure} in particular, even of a negative kind? Why does it not instead lead to frustration, humiliation, or determination to overcome our failures? Budd’s revision of Kant does not explain why the realization
of our failings should be met with such equanimity, absent the transcendence to an awareness of moral superiority. His account is not alone in this, if we reconsider the theorists I canvassed at the outset. Lyotard, for instance, does not explain why my incomprehension in the face of certain works of art leads me to awe or a deeper respect for them instead of a dismissal that they have “nothing to say to me.” Again, the onus remains on a purely epistemological account to show how cognitive failure brings pleasure—of a certain kind—with it. This is something that Sircello’s revised formulation equally lacks.

Let me turn now to our third option. I have rejected a theory of the sublime that attends to the object of experience because of its troubling ontology. I have also cast doubt on a purely epistemological account of cognitive failure because such an account will require some delineation of the object of experience if it seeks to circumscribe the notion of the sublime in any way. Sircello’s attempted revision of the epistemological thesis thus will not succeed: he had hoped we could theorize about the sublime by attending to the experience itself but we cannot, finally, exclude the experiential object from our account if we begin with the methodological assumptions that initially drove Sircello’s paper. I have said nothing so far about an intersubjective account of the sublime because there is almost no mention in the literature of this experience being culturally shared or even communicable. The sublime has been described as a wholly personal, even intimate experience without reference to others. If one wanted to attempt this line of inquiry, it will not be immune to the problems noted above: even an intersubjective epistemology must have reference to an object of (shared) experience, however that is conceived. What we now might consider, then, is a rejection of the delineation of the problem as Sircello first articulated it: the solution does not lie in a strictly epistemological account of the sublime, we may say, and sublime experience is not best construed as a species of cognitive failure. In fact, we may hazard that traditional theorizing about the sublime has been mistaken all along.

But what then is sublime experience? Experience as we normally understand the term is largely held to be intentional, with at least a perceived phenomenal content (whatever that content may turn out to be). If this experience is not conceptual, leading to the above-noted problems with epistemology, then we can suggest that it is perhaps emotional, a kind of feeling that we have when faced with some (or any) phenomena. That is, not only may we say that the sublime is not a species of cognitive failure, but also that it has nothing to do with cognition at all. Consider Budd’s account again: his interest lies in our feelings of humility and vulnerability, in a pleasurable realization of human limitations. What he has offered here, we can claim, is an (incomplete) account of a type of feeling that is a response to the world. But if we seek to describe the sublime as a feeling (of pleasure) of a certain kind, we face a paradox: either feelings are intentional and object-regarding (and so are theorizable in the above problematic ways), or feelings are nonintentional and cannot be theorized at all.²³ Let me develop this a little further. On the one hand, feelings can be seen as intentional—like the feelings of love we have for somebody, or the feelings of resentment we have toward particular political decisions, or feelings of fear toward certain things, and so on. If feelings are intentional they can also be theorized, but if they are intentional we also return to the same objections: Why does the sublime capture feelings in response to some objects/situations and not others? Why these feelings (awe, incomprehension, and so forth) and not others?

If, however, we interpret feelings as nonconceptual and nonintentional, we are left with something that cannot readily be theorized at all: How do we provide a theory of this sort of thing beyond some kind of literary capturing of the feelings as they occur? They take no object and have naught to do with cognition. With this option we come full circle to the sources Sircello initially mined for his discussion of the sublime in literary and mystical texts. What he called “sublime discourse,” as “language that is or purports to be . . . expressive of sublime experience” (and which I take this side of the paradox to intend), he held in opposition to “talk about the sublime” that is reflective and analytic (and which includes the works of Burke and Kant) (p. 541). Sircello quoted, as examples of sublime discourse, Wordsworth:

For I would walk alone/In storm and tempest or in starlight nights/Beneath the quiet heavens, and at that time/Have felt what’er there is of power in sound/To breathe an elevated mood, by form/Or image unprofaned; and I would stand/Beneath some rock, listening
to sounds that are/The ghostly language of the ancient earth./Or make their dim abode in distant winds.22

And the Tao te Ching:

The name that can be named/is not the eternal Name./The un-nameable is the eternally real./Naming is the origin/of all things./Free from desire, you realize the mystery./Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations./Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source./This source is called darkness./Darkness within darkness./The gateway to all understanding.23

In both cases we have expressions of sublime experience that do not attempt to analyze or theorize that experience, that do not attempt to "talk about" the sublime at all, but instead use poetic language to communicate a feeling the author has or has had. While such descriptions or expressions may be evocative, they do nothing for a purported theory of the sublime. If this is what we are left with, it is so philosophically limited as to amount to nothing in the way of a theory of the sublime.

What may be most unsatisfying about this third option—the sublime as a feeling whether intentional or nonintentional—is that it rejects the history of talk about the sublime to date. The fundamental questions of a tradition—What kinds of objects are sublime? What does the sublime tell us about ourselves as subjects? and, centrally, What does sublime experience illuminate about the limitations of our access to the world?—have no purchase in a purely phenomenological or emotional account. This is deeply unsatisfying because if we accept this option, we must conclude that a theory of the sublime such as we have historically striven for is simply out of reach.

Let me briefly review my claims in closing. I have argued that if we accept Sircello’s articulation of the problem with theories of the sublime, we are tasked with the difficulties attendant upon the notion of epistemological transcendence, the major theme that runs through historical attempts to theorize the sublime. This theme seems to incorporate a second theme of ontological transcendence that binds us to problematic ontological commitments even when these are unarticulated. Even the sophisticated treatment to which Kant subjected the sublime is not immune to this problem. The sublime, we have seen, cannot be an object of experience, but neither can it be a description of the cognitive failure of a given subject. If it is to deal only with some feeling or emotive state, it devolves to no theory whatsoever. In the one interpretation, the sublime can be nothing; in the second, anything; and in the third, it cannot be theorized at all.24

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10. Immanuel Kant, Critik der Urteilskraft (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). I rely for English translation of this text on Critique of Judgment, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1972). References to the English version of the third Critique will appear in the text in parentheses, with section and page number; references to the German text will be provided in subsequent footnotes.


12. Ibid.


16. As Paul Guyer has noted, “it is we ourselves who are sublime.” See his “The Difficulty of the Sublime,” presented to the American Society for Aesthetics Annual General Meeting, Providence, Rhode Island, October 2005, for the panel “Knowing the Sublime,” p. 15.


21. My thanks to Mark Smith of Queen’s University at Kingston for a discussion on this point.


24. An early version of this article was presented at the American Society for Aesthetics Annual General Meeting, Providence, Rhode Island, October 2005, for the panel “Knowing the Sublime.” I greatly benefited from the commentary provided by Jeffrey Wilson, Department of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, and from discussion by participants Paul Guyer, Kirk Pillow, and Melissa Zinkin.