

HEIDEGGER AND THE PROBLEM OF THE SUBLIME

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The aim of this piece is to explore the sublime through Martin Heidegger's earlier philosophy. Whereas Julian Young has read the sublime in Heidegger's work as "holiness," I will eschew this approach for one closer to the original meaning of sublimity.¹ By reading aspects of Heidegger's thinking alongside Kant's canonical formulation of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement*, I attempt to show why Heidegger neglected to deal with the notion, but also how he might have reconciled it with his ontology. I argue that by comparing the sublime to an ontological mood of disclosure, rather than understanding it as an aesthetic experience, one is able to give an account which overcomes some—if not all—of the concept's metaphysical baggage bequeathed by Kant.

1 Heidegger and aesthetics

My intention with this article is somewhat complicated by the fact that in all of his discussions of art Heidegger never explicitly refers to the sublime by name. Of several vague allusions to the concept, the following quote from *Being and Time* is perhaps the closest Heidegger actually comes to broaching it:

[In technological enframing, the] forest is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock, the river is water power,

¹Young 2002, p. 43.

the wind is wind ‘in the sails’ . . . But in this kind of discovery of nature, nature as what ‘stirs and strives,’ what overcomes us, entrances us as landscape, remains hidden.²

An aesthetic understanding of nature which “overcomes us, entrances us” is rarely again offered by Heidegger, despite the fact that his later thought develops this early concern with countering the modern prevalence of technological appropriation. The consequence is that finding a place for the sublime in his philosophy involves a certain amount of conjecture, alongside analysis of what he actually said about art, aesthetics, and beauty. In this article I will attempt to understand a curious omission from Heidegger’s writings.

Our starting-point is a brief remark upon Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics. It will be seen that his neglect of the sublime is intimately linked to what he regards as the metaphysical origins of aesthetics (the discipline from which our understanding of the sublime arises). For Heidegger, philosophy from Plato down is characterised by its forgetting of being. The history of this gradual forgetting is also the history of metaphysics—metaphysics, in various ways, studies beings rather than *being*: the being of those beings. The raising again of the question of being is the overarching ontological goal of Heidegger’s thinking, and in raising this question he hopes in turn to question metaphysics in its manifold forms. For reasons that will become apparent Heidegger views aesthetics as one such metaphysical enterprise, and so his philosophy of art accordingly seeks to reinterpret artworks ontologically.

Heidegger’s specific aversion to aesthetics is principally due to its being a product of epistemology, which he regards as metaphysical since it interprets beings as objects of a subject’s experience, rather than paying heed to their being. Alexander Baumgarten first gave the term ‘aesthetics’ its modern meaning in *Aesthetica*, adapting it from the Greek ‘αἰσθητικός’ (*aisthētikos*), meaning that which is open to perception.³ Heidegger claims that such an experiential understanding of an artwork distorts its essence:

²Heidegger 2010a, p.70.

³Liddell and Scott 1859, s.v. ‘αἰσθητικός’.

Aesthetics treated the artwork as an object, as indeed an object of αἴσθησις, of sensory apprehension in a broad sense. These days, such an apprehension is called an ‘experience’. . . . But perhaps experience is the element in which art dies.⁴

It is clear, then, that for Heidegger the metaphysical foundation of aesthetics—the philosophy of art understood experientially—is wholly anathema to the true essences of art, beauty, and perhaps the sublime, because it interprets them experientially rather than ontologically.

Although Heidegger does not say whether the sublime forms a part of his criticism of aesthetics, it would be consistent with his position if we assume it does. To better understand why, consider Kant’s articulation of the sublime in §§23-54 of the third *Critique*, which is by far the most influential and comprehensive formulation of the concept. In line with Heidegger’s criticism of aesthetics as essentially epistemological—and so metaphysical—Kant regards the sublime as “not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas.”⁵ For Kant, the sublime does not exist independently of the subject, but is rather the result of a perception of an object running up against the mind’s transcendental limits of understanding. He says: “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging subject, and not in the object of nature that occasions this disposition by the judgement formed of it.”⁶ When Kant’s description of the sublime as a product of mind is viewed in the light of aesthetics—understood as a relation of sensation between subject and object—then this would indeed make the sublime a metaphysical concept for Heidegger. We can begin to see the reason for his hesitation to deal with the sublime, as it appears to be inextricably linked to what he regards as the metaphysical and epistemological foundation of aesthetics.

⁴Heidegger 2002, p. 50.

⁵Kant 2007, p. 80.

⁶Ibid., p. 86.

2 Heidegger and the beautiful

However, if we turn instead to beauty, it seems that the different ground of the concept identified by Kant allows for some rough parallels with Heidegger's thoughts on the matter. The reason for this is that the feeling of beauty, for Kant, is occasioned by the thing itself. Unlike the sublime, "[t]he beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and . . . we may with perfect propriety call many such objects beautiful."⁷ For Kant, perception of a particular form—the roundness, softness, and gentle scent of a petal, for example—harmonises with the faculties of the mind in such a way that the subject may judge the object to be beautiful. Heidegger, in turn, does not doubt that form plays a part. For him, beauty "consist[s] in form, but only because the *forma* once took its light from being and the being of beings."⁸ The principal difference lies in Heidegger's rejection of the role of a transcendental subject. Against Kant, he argues that beauty does not exist "relative to pleasure, . . . as its object."⁹ Heidegger instead claims that beauty must be understood as something more than an aesthetic judgement of an object experienced by the subject—elusively suggesting that beauty draws ontologically from the "light" of being.

Let us elaborate on this possibility. It seems that Heidegger's understanding of beauty is—to some extent—compatible with Kant's notion of form playing a role in our judgement of it. However, the traditional notion of form is itself thrown into question as part of Heidegger's attempt to ontologically challenge the metaphysical ground of aesthetics. He claims that beauty is not limited to the beautiful form, but rather, because "*forma* once took its light from . . . the being of beings," the formally beautiful being allows beauty itself to come to presence. Heidegger articulates this succinctly when punning on 'fine' and 'beautiful': "[i]n the fine [*schön*] arts, the art is not itself beautiful, but is, rather, called so because it brings forth the beautiful [*Schöne*]."¹⁰ Heidegger thus advances his understanding of the formally beautiful

⁷Ibid., p. 75-76.

⁸Heidegger 2002, p. 16.

⁹Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 52.

being letting beauty itself come to presence, rather than understanding beauty as the feeling evoked by aesthetic judgement of the thing, as the Kantian interpretation would have it. To give an analogous example, Heidegger describes a forest's "healing expanse" as "not that *of* the forest, but rather, the forest's own expanse is *let into what heals*."¹¹ For Heidegger, the essence of healing exists above and beyond the forest which emanates healing, and likewise the essence of beauty is greater than the beautiful form. In this way, Heidegger bypasses the epistemological method of seeing beauty as a particular type of aesthetic judgement occasioned in the subject by an object, attempting instead to better understand the essence of beauty beyond the subject-object relation.

For our purposes, the main issue with Heidegger's account of the beautiful is precisely that it is limited only to the beautiful, and neglects its sister-concept, the sublime. Heidegger puts forth a compelling and suggestive case for the beautiful as something which comes to presence through beings, but in a way this has only risen to the easier of Kant's challenges—after all, in the third *Critique* Kant tells us that the origin of beauty is "a ground external to ourselves," and it seems Heidegger's argument is in this respect not so radically different.¹² In contrast, the central metaphysical ground of the Kantian sublime—the notion of the subject's judgement of an object *creating* the aesthetic phenomenon—is not obviously related to form at all.¹³ The sublime is the aesthetic emotion which for Kant originates in the transcendental subject itself and "attitude of mind."¹⁴ It seems that the sublime of aesthetic tradition, indebted above all to Kant, is so philosophically entrenched in the mind rather than in beings themselves that it cannot be similarly adopted by Heidegger. It is this which surely explains his reluctance to openly discuss the concept.

¹¹Heidegger 2010b, p. 133.

¹²Kant 2007, p. 77.

¹³Although Kant notes that magnitude is the most common formal cause of the sublime, greatness of size is insufficient by itself. For example, a sky of white clouds and a sky of storm clouds evoke very different feelings.

¹⁴Kant 2007, p. 77.

3 The sublime and attunement

The way to deal with this problem is to find another way apart from form to approach the concept. If the sublime is something which overcomes us, yet we seek to question the Kantian interpretation of its origin as a judgement of an object which reaches the transcendental limits of reason, then—remaining faithful to Heidegger’s ambitions—we must look for another way to understand the phenomenon. One possible path is through Heidegger’s phenomenological discussion of disclosing moods in ‘What is Metaphysics?’ and *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. By understanding the sublime in accordance with Heidegger’s understanding of moods, rather than as formally dependent like beauty, we may be able to conceive of it without the Kantian dependence on epistemological aesthetics.

Heidegger describes the importance of disclosing moods thus: “attunements are not something merely at hand. They themselves are precisely a fundamental manner and fundamental way of being, indeed of being-there.”¹⁵ For Heidegger, moods such as love, grief, *angst*, and so on, are not to be understood as subjective experiences, but rather as prior to any subsequent conception of the world in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. Instead, we are “always already attuned” to the world.¹⁶ This is central to the issue at hand: if the sublime can be understood in such terms, then we may be able to develop a conception of it which moves beyond the epistemological basis of aesthetics and into ontology. Speaking of the example of profound boredom as a mood, Heidegger says: “when we are not actually busy with things or ourselves this ‘as a whole’ overcomes us—for example in genuine boredom. . . . This boredom reveals beings as a whole.”¹⁷ The crucial point to be drawn from this is that for Heidegger such moods may reveal the being of beings to us in various ways.

It is now worth exploring whether the sublime can be characterised analogously. It seems to me that the sublime reveals beings in a man-

¹⁵Heidegger 1995, p. 67.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁷Heidegger 1978, p. 101.

ner similar to *angst*, as a disjunctive kind of mood: a break with our everyday engagement with beings. When we are overcome by the sublime, our usual manner of being-in-the-world is disrupted by shock. When confronted by a sublime artwork or landscape, our prior moods of attunement are swept away by the aesthetic discomfort characteristic of the phenomenon, and the sheer existence of the sublime entity overwhelms us. Indeed, perhaps once again pointing obtusely toward the sublime, Heidegger claims that such shock discloses the being of beings: “[s]hock lets us be taken aback by the very fact that beings *are*.”¹⁸ This ontological force is central to understanding how the Heideggerian sublime might challenge the metaphysics of the Kantian interpretation. Éliane Escoubas perceptively notes that “[t]he Kantian sublime . . . is a distant and intermediate glimpse of the ontological difference: an intermediate glimpse of the appearing of what appears. Of appearing itself.”¹⁹ It seems that Escoubas’s remark is in line with Heidegger’s description of the power of shock. Not only does it capture perfectly the force of the sublime, but more importantly shock links the sublime to being itself. If I am correct in likening shock to the sublime we have therefore been able to draw out the latter’s ontological power. Understanding the sublime as an ontological break with our everyday attunement allows us to begin to build a picture of what the Heideggerian sublime might have been.

4 The sublime and form

To what extent does this ontological interpretation of the sublime as a break with everyday attunement challenge the traditional formulation of the concept, as exemplified by Kant? If it can be shown to break with the traditional formulation, then there seems to be no reason why the sublime cannot escape the aesthetic grounds which Heidegger’s philosophy of art aimed to question. And indeed, at least taken at face value, it seems that in bypassing the properties of objects and transcendental conditions of experience, to cut to the relation between

¹⁸Heidegger 2012, p. 14.

¹⁹Escoubas 1993, p. 70.

the sublime and being, we might have cast the sublime in a truly ontological light. But this would be a premature conclusion. The reason for this lies with the question of what exactly it is about a thing which summons a feeling of the sublime. If it is not due to the form of the thing, as with the beautiful, then what is it about a sublime being which means that, in Kant's words, "the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby"?²⁰ Or in Heideggerian terminology: why do certain beings allow for us to engage with them, whereas others sublimely resist us? Following this line thought, it seems that understanding the sublime purely in terms of an ontological break with prior engagement is insufficient to answer these questions, as we have to understand what exactly this break consists of. However, the problem this then poses for the Heideggerian reading is that we are led to deal with the sublime on the terms of experience in order fully to explain the occurrence of the phenomenon.

As noted, the problem is that in contrast to the beautiful, formal qualities do not play a major role in the arising of the sublime. For instance, we do not say of the Matterhorn that it is the jaggedness of the summit and its colours shifting with the fading light which summon a feeling of the sublime. What brings it to us is rather that the mountain towers over us, and that we feel helpless when envisioning the sheer effort it would take to conquer it. The philosophical significance of these qualities that we enjoy in the Matterhorn is that they are not independent *of*, but relative *to* the subject, as Kant notes:

If, however, we call anything not merely great, but, without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect . . . great, that is to say, sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself.²¹

Unfortunately for the Heideggerian reading of the sublime that I have tried to develop, Kant's insight still holds true upon reflection. Burke famously argued that the sublime originated in that which overcame

²⁰Kant 2007, p. 76.

²¹Ibid., p. 80.

the observer, citing “Darkness, Solitude, Silence” as principle examples.²² On this point most would agree: the sublime is essentially a relational phenomenon, characterised by the repelling of the subject by the object. Yet this sits somewhat at odds with Heidegger’s philosophy of art. That the sublime is better explained in terms of the subject-object distinction, as my sketch of the sublime as a break with engagement showed, means that the phenomenon belongs at least equally to traditional epistemologically indebted aesthetics as much as it does to ontology.

5 Conclusion—Heidegger and the sublime

It would seem, therefore, that the sublime remains inextricably connected to the subject-object distinction—at least to some degree. The sublime can be understood as a disclosing mood—as Heidegger might have argued—but one which, unlike beauty, is not purely called forth by engagement with the thing itself. Rather, it is created by the subject being held back by something overwhelming, as Kant and Burke said. Problematically, this does seem to fall back on an understanding of the sublime which is reliant upon the subject-object distinction, a distinction which is revealed to us in the shock that breaks with attunement. The problem harks back to Kant’s analysis of the sublime as the transcendental subject’s “representation of nature,” rather than being of nature itself.²³ It seems that although we managed to move beyond the Kantian articulation of aesthetic experience, and into sublime presence, there is still a problem left over—whereas the beautiful is linked to form, and so persistent across nature regardless of its disclosure by the subject, the sublime is not linked to form in an intimate way at all, and instead still seems to rely on some form of subjectivity.

In turn this opens a wider discussion as to the successes and failures of Heidegger’s attempt to question the subject-object distinction. Certainly, his illuminating ontological discussions of art in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ and elsewhere go some way to achieving this.

²²Burke 1990, p. 65.

²³Kant 2007, p. 77.

But the example of the sublime puts his project itself into question, as any mood of disclosure or engagement is disrupted when the subject is thrown back upon itself by the object. This conundrum, it seems to me, is the principal reason why Heidegger never explicitly broached the notion of the sublime, even though its fundamental relation to being means that it should be a concept, like the beautiful, which he could have accommodated into his own philosophy.

Kant's analysis of the sublime was based upon the perception of an object clashing with the limits of understanding, and it seems that ultimately any plausible Heideggerian interpretation must make a similar concession to the subject. On the interpretation suggested, we saw how the sublime might be successfully turned away from a traditional aesthetic analysis towards a conceptualisation which brings its latent ontological force to the fore. But we also saw that this ontological force must, nonetheless, be understood in part as a type of experiential encounter with a thing, and not, therefore, devoid of traditional metaphysics.

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