LIVING LARGE: KANT AND THE SUBLIMITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Technology is gaining new recognition in mainstream ethics courses. In considering the ethical importance of technology, classical theories such as Kantian deontology and various strands of utilitarianism are brought to bear on the value and risks inherent in technology. Some radical critiques even question the benefits of adopting such a technological form of life in the first place. One avenue that is overlooked in all of these analyses is that of the aesthetic dimension of modern technology and its relation to ethical interests.

Kant is best known for a caricature drawn easily from his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), and even from readings that include parts of his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). Such a view takes Kant to be solely reason-based in his take on morality, with it being nothing but the rational testing of one’s maxims against the moral law and with its motivation lying in the mere thought of this moral law. While this is an important aspect to Kant’s thought, it is by no means complete. His critical thought culminated in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), and this work involves important attempts to analyze purposiveness in art and in nature as a way of connecting how the world operates (theoretical knowledge) with how we are commanded to act in the world (practical knowledge). Whereas the beautiful in art and nature possesses a form that results in harmonious play between the imagination and the understanding, the sublime possesses the ability (due to its relative formlessness) to provoke discord between the imagination (the faculty of sensation) and reason. While the sublime object strains the human’s ability to comprehend a finite, formed object, it also reminds the faculty of reason of its superiority over nature and sensible powers therein.
While Kant claimed that the sublime was limited to objects of nature, some have asserted its applicability to technological artifacts. David Nye argues in his American Technological Sublime that modern technology and its advances are often instances of the technological sublime. His analysis, however, argues from the assumption that the sublime as portrayed by Kant and others is naturally amenable to human productions. This basis is presupposed but not defended in his first chapter, where Nye asserts “From Burke to Kant to later thinkers, the natural world plays a smaller and smaller role in definitions of the sublime, and the observer becomes central in defining the emotion as the mind projects its interior state onto the world.” This foundation of his analysis, however, fails to justify how Kant’s notion of the sublime (which he limits to experiences of nature) can be extended to technological artifacts. What is needed to complement Nye’s analysis of the technological sublime is a warrant that allows technology and its artifacts into the defined category of sublime objects.

To this end, I will argue that modern technology and its artifacts possess the ability to inspire the discord between imagination and reason that Kant finds so valuable about the sublime. Through enormous buildings, grand displays of power (constructive and destructive), and through the alienation that system critiques of technology point out, the human agent can experience the sublime. The importance of this to ethics is that the examination of technology is not merely a “cold” fact calculating exercise (whether it is the mere “testing” of maxims or “weighing” of consequences), but also can involve aesthetic experience in understanding technology’s ethical value(s). This inquiry will first begin with a short exposition of Kant’s theory of the sublime. Some reasons why modern technology can evoke an experience of the sublime will be detailed, along with the relation of the technologically sublime to Kant’s moral theory; one such aspect to be analyzed is the sublime’s way of instantiating abstract moral concepts (in Kant’s scheme) in an agent’s relationship with a concrete object of the senses. I will also deal with the objections that Kant raises to artifacts being evocative of the sublime experience, and provide a way to fit the technology into Kant’s own reading of how objects relate to the sublime. This inquiry concludes with thoughts relating the (purely rational/argumentative) calculation-based and (aesthetic) experience-based methods to moral decision-making and moral cultivation.
KANT AND THE SUBLIME

The two main works that deal with the sublime in Kant’s system are his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1763, OBS) and his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790, CJ). The former work comes from Kant’s “pre-critical” period and responds mainly to the psychologistic thought of Edmund Burke on the beautiful and the sublime. In general, previous thinkers such as Addison and Burke saw the awe and wonder in the sublime as a cause for humbling humanity in the face of greater powers, namely, that of omnipotent God. Kant, however, turns the endpoint of the sublime around and through it describes the process in which terror, awe, etc., leads to an elevation of one’s humanity. In the OBS, Kant traces the various aspects of experience that would cause a feeling of the sublime and that would result in this elevation of humanity, but a true analysis of this aesthetic experience and the theoretical linkages it shares with morality is left until his more mature critical work, the CJ, almost three decades later. It is in this latter cornerstone work of his critical project (the CJ as the third and final critique) that Kant attempts to reconcile the positions of his critiques of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. One of the keys to this enterprise, Kant details, is the notion of purposiveness. Purposiveness can either be subjective or objective, that is, either seeming to dwell in an observer or in the object under observation. Consequently, the CJ deals with a critique of aesthetic reflective judgment and with that of teleological reflective judgment (CJ 5:193).

While the main point of this study is the sublime, a few words about the beautiful must be had in order to contextualized the relation between these two types of aesthetic experience. The beautiful deals with the formal properties of an object being such that it brings about a harmonious interplay between the understanding and the imagination (the faculty of sensation). This “free play” (Freies Spiel) of these faculties in the observer is inherently pleasurable, due to its enlivening of the natural faculties of the human mind. This pleasure is not directed toward an interest, or it would be the agreeable or the good. Instead, it is “disinterested pleasure,” and it refers merely to the “fit” between the object’s form and the subject’s faculties. It is in this fit that the subject senses a “purpose without purpose,” which Kant concludes is the “mere form of purposiveness” (CJ 5:221). Goodreau describes this “purposive” fit in Kant’s CJ in the following manner:
In apprehending a given object of sense the imagination does not have free play, since it is tied to the determinate form of the sensed object. But the object may offer the imagination just the sort of form in the combination of its manifold as the imagination would design in harmony with the understanding’s lawfulness if it were left to itself and free. . . . Here the form of lawfulness itself is compared to the form of purposiveness itself; the imagination is free and active in the judgment of taste. The mind is conscious of its freedom.¹⁰

Thus, the beautiful object is an experience of freedom due to its exhibition of a purposeless purpose — it has not been designed for such a fit with the human mental faculties, but it does possess such a perfect fit as if the human mind had designed it itself. The beautiful deals with objects that result in a harmonious interplay of two cognitive faculties of the human mind. As will become evident, the sublime alters this formula quite substantially.

For Kant, the counterpart to the beautiful in aesthetic experience is the sublime. In his “Analytic of the Sublime” in the *CJ*, Kant begins to delineate the sublime from the beautiful. Both are reflective judgments, as opposed to determinative judgments of sense; their satisfaction does not depend on a sensation or on a determinate concept (*CJ* 5:244). The differences between these two become obvious, however, in that “The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality” (*CJ* 5:244). The sight of an “object” noted as sublime arouses in the subject an emotion substantially different from the beautiful — the limitlessness of this object leads to “an emotion which seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination. . . since the mind is not merely attracted by the object, but is also always reciprocally repelled by it, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure as it does admiration or respect” (*CJ* 5:245). This “negative pleasure” of the sublime is already described in a very similar fashion to the “pleasure” that is had through restraining oneself out of respect for the moral law. The links between morality and the sublime will be explicated later; for now, suffice it to say that the sublime is a powerful and moving experience that holds similarities to the type of pleasure contained in often difficult moral decisions.
Kant concludes his discussion of the relation between these two experiences with the most important difference that exists between the beautiful and the sublime. In regard to beauty, Kant finds that the object has a certain type of inherent (self-sufficient) purposiveness that “seems as if it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment” (CJ 5:245), which leads to a harmonious free play between the imagination and the understanding. The sublime, on the other hand, is evoked by an object that “appear[s] in its form to be contrapurposeful for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination” (CJ 5:245). The beautiful encourages a calm play in our faculties, whereas the sublime encourages a violent struggle between reason and the imagination that culminates in a subjective pleasure. What will become important, however, is the meaning of this experience — indeed, it is through the sublime that Kant finds that important moral “lessons” can be experienced and emphasized.

In general, Kant delineates the sublime in reference to magnitude and power. After relating the sublime to the “absolutely great” (CJ 5:248), he indicates, “That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses” (CJ 5:250). The two types of sublime experience deal with two other faculties of the mind — that of the faculty of cognition and the faculty of desire. These two faculties, representing theoretical reason and practical reason, respectively, are related to the imagination in a non-harmonious fashion, leading to the estimation of reason as a faculty that surpasses the senses (i.e., the imagination). The two types of sublime, the mathematical and the dynamical, will be briefly explained before these concepts are applied to the sublimity of modern technology.

The mathematically sublime deals with the human mind’s treatment of extended objects. The “absolutely great” of the sublime confounds the imagination, but how exactly? Kant answers this question by distinguishing between two types of sizes — mathematical magnitudes and the absolutely great (CJ 5:250). Mathematical magnitudes are known by mathematic means (through number), and there exists no “greatest” for this type of object due to the possibility of endless mathematical progression. The absolutely great object, however, is one that no greater can be judged by the subject in a single intuition (CJ 5:251). Kant delineates the two operations of the imagination that are related to each type of judging — apprehension and comprehension. Given that we can apprehend objects without a foreseeable limit, the faculty of reason (which always demands the unconditioned totality) is lead to demand a complete com-
prehension of such a totality. The mind, however, because of the limits of comprehension (as part of imagination) cannot experience the demanded totality, and thus leaves imagination humbled to the faculty of reason due to its grasp of a concept that “surpasses every standard of sense” \((CJ 5:254)\). Kant thereby pronounces, “Nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity” \((CJ 5:255)\). The failure of imagination to aesthetically grasp this totality further reminds humans of their supersensible qualities and callings \((CJ 5:255)\).

The dynamically sublime deals with the exhibition of power (dynamism) by nature. Kant defines “power” as that which “is superior to great obstacles” \((CJ 5:260)\), and “dominion” as when “it is also superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power” \((CJ 5:260)\). Nature, in the dynamically sublime, is considered as that which is a power but one that lacks dominion over humans. Kant approaches this latter claim in a slightly different way by using the concepts of “fear” and “afraid.” Humans fear nature because it possesses immense sources of power in its natural forces. In experiencing nature as dynamically sublime, however, humans are not afraid of it — if they were, they would be in a situation in which their ends are threatened and which fails to have the detachment necessary for an aesthetic reflecting judgment \((CJ 5:261)\). Just like the individual who fears God (because of its omnipotent power), but is not afraid of God’s power (because he or she is virtuous and beyond holy condemnation), the human experiencing the dynamically sublime fears nature’s power but realizes through it that he or she has a source of value that transcends the currency of sensibility. While nature has a large power over life, limb, and fortune, it lacks any say over a human’s reason, which at the end of the day is the source of their autonomy and virtue \((CJ 5:262)\). For Kant, the dynamically sublime strikes fear into the individual through the path of the imagination (sensibility), but leaves him or her feeling elevated through the realization of their possession of a power greater than all of nature — reason. More on the moral implications of the sublime will be fleshed out in the following sections; suffice it to say, however, that both types of the sublime fulfill an important function morally because they assist an agent in seeing his or her true role as a moral agent.
MODERN TECHNOLOGY AS SUBLIME

Modern concerns over technology are very focused on ethical dimensions. As Winston points out, “Technologies are not value-neutral... In each case, there are human ends and values, which stand behind and direct the technological process.”1 In regarding the actual experience of morality, Kant found one of the most important moral experiences an individual could have was that of the sublime. The task for this section is to connect these two claims and concerns with an analysis of how technology and its artifacts can possibly evoke the sublime. Taking the above analysis of the sublime, one can see how technology can evoke the mathematical sublime through its magnitude. Technology has reached the point where it is able to produce artifacts of enormous size and reach, thus leading to the possibility of confounding an observer’s power of comprehension. For instance, looking up at tall buildings or monuments (the Washington Monument comes to mind), or looking down from the Hoover Dam or the Empire State Building all entail the same type of sensible incomprehension that Kant delineated in the sublime. All of these artifacts confound our ability to take everything in at once, leaving one awestruck and staring in wonder. If one is not afraid of falling off the edge of the enormous building, then they may be able to feel curiously captivated by the height and view offered. Kant refers to colossal views of nature as evoking this type of awe, but he also allows for the same experience at the sight of the pyramids in Egypt or of St. Peter’s in Rome (CJ 5:252). In these last two examples, we have instances of human constructions that stun the observer through the immensity of the aspects of their presentation; as Kant says of one entering St. Peter’s, “there is a feeling of the inadequacy of his [the observer’s] imagination for presenting the ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and, in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, and is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction” (CJ 2:252). There is not simply too much to see, but instead too much to mentally put together in a coherent whole that is demanded by reason, reminded of its ceaseless quest for totality as it were by the enormity of the object in view.

Technology and its artifacts can also engender a feeling of the dynamically sublime. Technology trades on the harnessing of power to accomplish given ends; it is in the witnessing of this power that the technological artifact has that evokes the relation of humanity to such phenomenal displays of force. Kant refers to the violence and power of nature in the form of earthquakes, volcanoes, and storms; the same type
of force that dwarfs the initiative and will of human agents can also be
had in this age of technology. Instead of arithmetical increases in force
through technology (such as better swords, spears, and arrows), moder-
nity has seen the exponential increase in the ability of technology to
instantaneously change the landscape, human lives, etc. For instance, the
furious power unleashed by modern weaponry on civilian targets shows a
power that is beyond resistance (at least within a certain zone). The tech-
nological device that manages to harness the universe’s most primordial
power, the nuclear weapon, provides a stunning example of a technology
that overshadows humanity’s ability to overcome its use — the site of the
mushroom cloud and the tanks and ships being blown away from test
explosions of this device hold the power to strike the human observer as
stronger than any force they could muster on the phenomenal (natural)
level. One can begin to see how the experience of this weapon could
evoke the sublime in the official report made by Brigadier General Tho-
mas Farrell concerning the tests of the first atomic weapon at Los Alamos
National Laboratory. He recounted about the test,

The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnifi-
cent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phe-
nomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before.
. . . Thirty seconds after the explosion came, first, the air blast
pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed
almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar
which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny
things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces here-
tofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate tools
for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical,
mental, and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be
realized.12

This description helps to illustrate the power of such technological
devices and the impacts they can have on the individual observing agent.
One of the most important putative effects, according to Kant, is the
potential to experience the sublime through such a dynamic display of
forces greater than our bodily powers. The only thing that gives us secu-
ritv in the face of such a display, according to Kant, is the knowledge of
our faculty of reason and its postulation of moral powers that soar above
mere physical efficacy.
Before discussing the uses such experiences can have in moral contexts, one important objection from Kant’s own work must be broached. In his discussion of the sublime, Kant remarked that such a feeling of formlessness could not be had by “products of art” such as buildings, columns, etc. (CJ 5:253) because such works of technology had a purposive end (CJ 5:270). In this context, Kant worried that the object would always be connected with its end, and thus could not evoke a pure aesthetic judgment. Do such strictures count against modern technology being sublime in a Kantian sense? What must be distinguished is what Kant claimed and what his theory actually allows with its course of reasoning. While he claims that such instances of technology cannot be sublime, he does note the examples of St. Peter’s in Rome and of the pyramids as being related to the sublime. Can we place technology back into the experience of the sublime, while avoiding Kant’s argument that too much connection to human purposiveness robs such objects of their sublimity? Kant himself provides a course to take in answering this textual inconsistency in the CJ — such objects can and do evoke such immediate experiences of the sublime that is separate from their teleological artistry. For instance, after discussing the impurity of ends-based artifacts, Kant describes the purity of the sublime in the “starry heavens” — it cannot be sublime because of the thought of myriad worlds with rational beings lying out there, but instead merely because it impacts the senses and the imagination as a “broad, all-embracing vault” (CJ 5:270).

The important factor is not the ability of one to experience the sky through determinant concepts, but instead the fact that the individual can experience it on a pure aesthetic level. Just as the sky can be experienced free of conceptual baggage, so can the enormous behemoths of modern ships, buildings, etc. Just as the raging storm can evoke the sublime through its raw power, so can the explosion of a nuclear weapon through its body-disintegrating force. As Kant describes in his examples of St. Peter’s in Rome and of the pyramids, the important aspect is not whether ends were involved in the construction of an artifact, but instead if they are absent in the experience of it by an observer. If the latter is the case, then the experience can facilitate the disharmony between imagination and reason, leading one into the state of reflective judgment Kant calls sublime. Kant must not be strictly taken at his word that objects of human artistry are totally exempt from consideration as sublime. Indeed, in the modern world technology and its design are often so far removed from the context of operation that individual experience can diverge in large measure from designer’s intention.13 One often does not know nor
is concerned with the actual operation of some artifact—what one is concerned with is the spectacle that is mesmerizing them before their eyes.

THE SUBLIME AND THE MORAL

What role can such aesthetic experiences have in the curriculum of applied ethics, especially those concerning technology? This section will begin the discussion on just this topic, arguing that aesthetic experience of the sublime through modern technology can be a concern in ethical thought, and more importantly, that it shows a different dimension of ethical deliberation addressing technology and its harms and benefits. As the previous section demonstrated, it is not unreasonable to claim that the incredible scale and power of modern technology possesses the power to occasion a sublime experience in the observing agent. Following Kant, one can see that this experience of the sublime has important moral implications.

The basic thrust of the mathematically sublime is that it thwarts our imagination’s capability to uphold the demands of our faculty of reason. This leads to the finding in one’s faculty of reason “another, non-sensible standard, which has that very infinity under itself as a unit against which everything in nature is small, and thus found in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability” (CJ 5:261). Thus, in the experience of enormous technology and artifacts that dwarf the human frame are found opportunities to experience a capability that transcends mere physical size. What is unique about humans, according to this reading, is not in their physical attributes, but instead in their mental prowess (i.e., the exercise of their power of reason). Indeed, a human may not know how a skyscraper is built or for what exact purpose it was built, but they can realize through this experience of the sublime that they share in the mental faculty that lies behind and above this enormous structure.

This diminution of our physical dimensions and elevation of our faculty of reason lies at the basis of the moral implications in the dynamically sublime. Just as the object evoking the sublime can bring about a feeling of physical inferiority based on size, the same object can result in an initial inferiority based on power. For an example of this type of awe, one can turn to Lifton and Markusen’s description of the Los Alamos scientists’ reaction to the first detonation of a nuclear weapon:
Emilio Segrè combined a sense of awe ("I was flabbergasted by the new spectacle") with an insistent end-of-the-world image ("I believe that for a moment I thought the explosion might set fire to the atmosphere and thus finish the earth."). Kenneth Bainbridge combined fear and self-condemnation when he spoke of an unforgettably "foul and awesome display," and declared, "Now we're all sons of bitches." Oppenheimer's famous image from the Bhagavad Gita ("Now I am become Death the destroyer of worlds") contains a quality of terror somewhat covered over by its literary-mythological aspect. I. I. Rabi described "a chill" of a personal kind concerning the fragility of "my wooden house in Cambridge and my laboratory in New York, and of the millions of people living around there."\footnote{\textsuperscript{15}}

Notice in these accounts of the actual experience the feelings of powerlessness and mixed moral sentiments. Kant would argue that in a cultivated human (more on this notion of cultivation later) this feeling of "absolute" power in the explosion of such a technological artifact diminishes the prospects of a human in the face of its force, but allows one to see another source of value above and beyond such physical criteria. In such an experience one would initially \textit{fear} the force of such a weapon, but would consequently not be \textit{afraid} of it, as it cannot harm the true source of value that a rational agent possesses. In regard to the dynamically sublime, Kant argues that

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the irresistibility of its power certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity [\textit{Vermögen}] for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that domination. (\textit{CJ} 5:261-262)
\end{quote}

What is conveyed in both senses of the sublime is that our physical stature is inconsequential to our true value, either in regard to nature or the artifacts of technology. Thus, writers such as Winner, Baudrillard, and Strong point to the alienation brought on by increasingly autonomous and powerful technology;\footnote{\textsuperscript{16}} for such writers, the threat of technol-
ogy is that it does overpower our physical (and mental-calculative) abilities to perform tasks and produce valuable results. Others, such as Schiller, argue that another danger in this power of technology is that it seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once — it is often so powerful that its effects are ubiquitous and seemingly instantaneous. Joy even goes so far as to worry about technological control replacing human autonomy and freedom because of its ever increasing sophistication and power. What all these analyses of technology have in common is that they highlight the force and extent of technology in relation to our wills and our powers. Kant's reading of the sublime indicates that if one is confronted with this technological power instantiated in objects (buildings, weapons, space shuttle launches, etc.), one can feel displeasure in the realization that he or she can never equal such physical magnitude or force; alternately, they can experience pleasure at the realization that their value transcends such considerations as the physical. It is this latter realization that makes an experience of nature truly sublime. Kant argues that

in our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power (which is not a part of nature) to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial, and hence to regard its power (to which we are, to be sure, subjected in regard to these things) as not the sort of dominion over ourselves and our authority to which we would have to bow if it came down to our highest principles and their affirmation or abandonment. (CJ 5:262)

For Kant, nature is sublime when it strikes this fear in us, and is then accompanied by the concurrent realization that our capacities transcend mere nature; this realization not only concerns our capacities, but the vocation that is implied in them. Kant points out “nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature” (CJ 5:262). This “vocation of our capacity” (CJ 5:262) and our predisposition to it are highlighted in the experience of the sublime; for Kant, this vocation is that of becoming a morally autonomous being — that of perfect freedom through reason.

Thus, the observer of a frightful display of technology, such as an atomic weapon, can be lead from fear to a transcendence of physical worries through the sublime. This transcendence is facilitated by the realiza-
tion that they have a moral worth that is above and beyond physical size, and that the possession of such a worth provides a mandate for its sustenance. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797, MM), Kant indicates

Virtue is always in progress and yet always starts from the beginning. It is always in progress because, considered objectively, it is an ideal and unattainable, while yet constantly approximation to it is a duty. That it always starts from the beginning has a subjective basis in human nature, which is affected by inclinations because of which virtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all but, if it is not rising, it is unavoidably sinking. (MM 6:409)

It is the realization of the agent’s capacity for such moral worth and the never-ending quest it entails that is the true value of the sublime experience. The awe of modern technology should not simply make one a Luddite fearing all things mechanical; instead, the experience of the sublime through technology can have a moral value in that it can point out the sources of our value in non-physical capacities. In one of Kant’s earlier works, *History and Physiography of the Most Remarkable Cases of the Earthquake which Towards the End of the Year 1755 Shook a Great Part of the Earth* (1756, RCE), the detachment of humanity’s value from the physical is prefaced in the face of natural threats:

We see, however, that innumerable villains die in peace, that earthquakes, without distinction of ancient or modern inhabitants, have ever shaken countries. . . Man is not born to build everlasting cottages upon this stage of vanity. Because his whole life has a far nobler aim, how beautifully attuned to it are all the devastation, which the inconstancy of the world shows even in those things that appear to us to be the greatest and the most important, in order to remind us: that the goods of the earth can furnish no satisfaction to our inclination for happiness! (RCE 1:460)

Kant is doing more than merely finding the “brighter side” of earthquakes; instead, this is the beginning of a life-long philosophical quest to separate humanity’s value (and the happiness that is dependent upon that worthiness to be happy) from the world of nature. Nature is very “willing” to act against our desires and our wishes, and offers inclinations that
thwart the paths of virtue. If one reads nature as being merely physical in terms of space and/or force, then technology can also fall under such a reading; both storms and bombs cannot threaten that which is the source of human value — our moral vocation to strive to determine our wills from the self-given moral law, and not from the external lures of the inclinations (which are dependent upon an ever-changing nature for their creation, satisfaction, and continued felicity). Technology, as well as natural phenomena such as storms, mountains, etc., has the essential characteristics necessary to devalue humans qua physical beings and to highlight their value qua moral personalities.

CONCLUSION

What the aesthetic experience of the sublime highlights in regard to ethical deliberation is that there is an experiential aspect to morally worthy actions and intentions. Too much of ethical pedagogy focuses on the evaluation of cases in terms of counterfactual speculation concerning actual case results or future outcomes; while this is an integral part to philosophical activity, it overly emphasizes the removed, abstract thinking part at the expense of experience-based considerations. For instance, Winston advises such a calculation/results-based approach when he frames the moral implications of technology as “Each new technology thus raises the implicit ethical questions: ‘Should we employ this new technique/technology?’ and, if so, ‘How should we employ this new technique/technology?’” The direction these questions lead one in is simple — the focus should be on calculating the results of such a technology and abstracted examination at the various factors and stakeholders involved. Such philosophers as Shusterman have decried the trend in modern philosophy to remove itself away from issues of practical and bodily experience; for centuries, even Kant’s own philosophy has been criticized as remote and too abstract for everyday life. What the aesthetic experience of the sublime allows is an experiential component to the practice of morality. In terms of evaluating technology in applied ethics situations, harms and benefits can be considered, as well as the types of experiences such objects can bring about in the observer. A society can legitimately reflect upon the types of artifacts it produces and the types of citizens these artifacts (technologies) help create; in the case of modern technology, the feeling of the sublime may be one overlooked avenue for moral consideration.
The difficult question is, of course, how one weighs result-based calculations with experience-based concerns. This inquiry can only offer the following advice; perhaps it is not a matter of choosing between two methods, but is instead a choice of collaboration versus exclusion of aesthetic experience altogether. The aesthetic experience of the sublime through artifacts of technology may not be a sufficient reason for the continued existence of a certain technology (such as nuclear weapons), but it is a consideration concerning the moral effects such an artifact has and can have. By constraining ethics calculation to classroom abstraction and by ignoring the felt experience of such artifacts qua the sublime, ethics as a whole is impoverished. One only need to look at how Kant’s ethics is taught to see the separation of any experiential elements related to it — his ethical thought is often caricatured as abstract and not related to agential states, and is then critiqued because of just these factors. What needs to be added is that Kant shows quite a concern for the perpetual cultivation of the individual moral agent; whether it is the endless striving for moral worth that occasions the postulate of immortality in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) or the concerns over moral feeling in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant is ultimately concerned with how humans can live up to their vocation as moral (free) beings. In order to see this aspect of moral cultivation, one can turn to Kant’s concluding remarks in the 1800 text (composed of his edited lecture notes), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (*APV*). Remarking on the good and evil tendencies in human nature, Kant argues

Human nature also reveals a negative side, however, in that experience shows that in man there is an inclination to desire actively what is unlawful, although he knows very well that it is unlawful. This is the inclination to evil which arises as unavoidably and as soon as man begins to make use of his freedom. . . Hence, according to his sensible character, man must be judged as being evil (by nature). Man is destined by his reason to live in a society of other people, and in this society he has to cultivate himself, civilize himself, and apply himself to a moral purpose by the arts and sciences. No matter how great his animalistic inclination may be to abandon himself passively to the enticements of ease and comfort, which he calls happiness, he is still destined to make himself worthy of humanity by actively struggling with the obstacles that cling to him because of the crudity of his nature. (*APV* 7:324-325)
The sublime is one important, experiential way of realizing the separation between humanity's natural side (as phenomenon) and its rational (autonomous) side. Moral perfection is the ideal endpoint of a never-ending progression to always determine one's choice from the moral law, and not from inclinations. The inclusion of the aesthetic experience of the sublime is a way of cultivating and motivating individuals along such a path of morality.

As for the agents experiencing the sublime, Kant also notes that they must have some amount of moral cultivation as a necessary condition before this experience can truly be had. Whereas the experience of the sublime can be expected in everyone because each has the idea of the moral law within their nature (i.e., their reason) (*CJ* 5:265), its actual occurrence may be limited by individuals not fully cognizant of moral ideas. For Kant, the agent is left in an important dialectic — moral ideas are innate causes of the sublime experience, but this experience may be “missed” if these ideas are not properly cultivated to awareness. Thus, both sides of the ethical decision-making spectrum are represented. The pure-reason grounded discussion of moral theory and the moral law in the abstract are necessary precursors to truly experiencing the sublime, and this experience itself can provide further warrant and motivation for believing in a supersensible vocation and for continuing on with its development. Kant points out that the sublime involves a satisfaction of realizing our "vocation of our capacity as it is revealed to us in such a case, just as the predisposition to it lies in our nature; while the development and exercise of it is left to us and remains our responsibility” (*CJ* 5:262). Moral ideas are recognized as innate precursors to the experience of the sublime; another dimension of this experience is the amount of agent knowledge of these moral ideas (such as the moral law). Calculation-based methods can help bring such possibilities to light, whereas the experience-based methods involved in the aesthetic experience of the sublime can help the agent realize the veracity of these possibilities and actually feel the concept of moral worth.

At this point, I must note what this inquiry is not dealing with in Kant. The experience of the sublime has little to do with specific ends that practical reason may hold as obligatory for an agent. In the *MM*, for instance, Kant provides two such ends of virtue, the perfection of one’s self and the happiness of others. Such ends, by their very nature, flow from practical reason and apply to one’s maxims (insofar as they enshrine ends) in a calculative fashion. Thus, one can ask does action $x$ with
maxim y violate a duty of virtue to one’s self (for instance, the duty against unnecessary self-mutilation at MM 6:422-423)? The calculative approach to ethics would then ask if technology (or a certain purposive employment of it) would further these ends or conflict with such duties of virtue. For instance, is the world safer because of the (purposive) development of nuclear weapons and the lives that they can take? What I wish to emphasize is that another dimension of moral analysis can be found in Kant, and that is through the experiential side of the sublime. The experience-based approach to teaching ethics would then ask the question, what is the value of the experiences provoked by this technology, in light of the moral value that experiences of the sublime have in Kant’s CJ? The results-based approach would ask, how does technology in intentional use relate to our perfect and imperfect duties of right and virtue? One hopefully notices the difference between these two questions that can be asked from the writings of Kant in the setting of ethics instruction. What I believe is important about the experiential side is that it completes the picture of the rule of moral reasoning (the moral law, duties that are derived from it) with an experiential insight into what it feels like to be a moral agent endowed with a capacity of freedom that comes only from a faculty (reason) that transcends nature in scope and in value. I have elsewhere made the point about the experience of the beautiful being of moral value because it is an experience of a sort of freedom.25 This important aspect of experience is something that has been lamented in western philosophy,26 and is definitely an aspect that can be further developed in settings of ethics instruction (especially in regard to common readings/employments of Kant that ignore his aesthetic works).

The goal of moral cultivation and its resultant impact on moral decision-making is a key topic in the moral thought of Kant. Remarking on the end point of moral cultivation and the means to achieve it, Kant argues in his 1784-1785 lectures on ethics (Collins, LEC)27 that

The final destiny of the human race is moral perfection, so far as it is accomplished through human freedom, whereby man, in that case, is capable of the greatest happiness. . . . The destiny of man is therefore to obtain his greatest perfection by means of his freedom. . . . The universal end of mankind is the highest moral perfection; if only everyone were to so behave, that their conduct would coincide with the universal end, the highest perfection would be thereby obtained. Every individual must endeavor to order his conduct in accordance with this
end, whereby he makes his contribution such, that if everyone
does likewise, perfection is obtained. (*LEC* 27:470)

The end of mankind is this ideal moral perfection; this is to be
accomplished not through divine favor or habituation, but through
human freedom. This human freedom comes from actually choosing to
determine one’s will from the moral law, and not from nature. Obviously,
the dictates of duty from practical reason play an important role in the
exercise and promotion of this freedom. What is the value of the sub-
lime experience in relation to the laws of freedom, as spelled out in the
formulations of the moral law, the principle of right, the principle of vir-
tue, etc.? A promising hint that is in line with the themes of the experi-
ence-based approach given in this essay can be found in the “Doctrine of
the Methods of Ethics” portion of the *MM*. Here Kant emphasizes that
the value of examples in moral pedagogy is not in their dealing with the
substance of moral duty, law, etc., since “a maxim of virtue consists pre-
cisely in the subjective autonomy of each human being’s practical reason
and so *implies* that the law itself, not the conduct of other human beings,
must serve as our incentive” (*MM* 6:480, emphasis added). Examples do
not give the rule of virtue or any information on specific duties enjoined,
as these derive from subjective autonomy, which stems in turn from the
subject’s own practical reason (not from a merely contingent experience).
Kant argues in the *MM* that examples provide, through a representation
of dutiful action, “proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with
duty” (*MM* 6:480). It is clear to see that the experience of the sublime
follows this same track — the value of the experience of the sublime is
not in terms of what it tells one about their duties to themselves or to
others, but in terms of the *experience* of transcendental worth and freedom
qua moral/rational being that confirms the rule of morality and moti-
vates action in line with such a rule. The experience of the sublime,
whether it is in relation to the natural or the technological, is morally
valuable because it provides some type of practical support that such a
moral vocation does exist, and that such a value to humanity is not
grounded in the goods and satisfactions of the natural (phenomenal)
world. The sublime experience, as produced by the powers and scope of
modern technology, can further emphasize humanity’s separation from
physical considerations in terms of its ultimate value, and to that extent
can offer an experience-based aspect to applied ethics. The aesthetic
experience of the sublime can apply to modern technology, and more
importantly, can play a crucial role in orienting the human agent in this
world filled with modern technology and the often-dehumanizing results that spring from it.

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the 2002 Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum Conference, Greenville, South Carolina. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments.

2 In terms of his series of “Critiques.”

3 See Cj 5:253 and 5:270.


5 Ibid., 8.


8 Paul Guyer, Kant and the Experience of Freedom, 259.

9 I will not deal extensively with the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1763) in this paper, as it is clearly a pre-critical writing, and hence lacks overt links to the philosophy of both theoretical and practical linkages that appear in his Critique of Pure Reason (1781/1787) and Critique of Practical Reason (1788). My analysis will instead focus almost exclusively on the Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790) as it explicitly relates its projects to the previous two critiques. The third critique also forgoes aspects of the OBS, such as divisions of the sublime into the splendid, terrifying, and noble, as well as its mixing of the beautiful with the beautiful. Instead, the CJ strictly separates the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as divides the experience and theoretical account of the sublime into only two new categories—the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. One must assume that what little theoretical analysis was given on the previous division offered in the pre-critical OBS has been discarded by Kant in his 1790 work on aesthetics.


20 The translation of *History and Physiography of the Most Remarkable Cases of the Earthquake which Towards the End of the Year 1755 Shook a Great Part of the Earth* to be used is found in *Four Neglected Essays by Immanuel Kant* (Trans. J. Richardson, Ed. S. Palmquist, Philopsyche Press, Hong Kong, 1994).


23 See 5:122-123 of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.


27 The *Collins* translation to be used is found in *Lectures on Ethics* (Trans. Peter Heath, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997).