

Striving: Feeling the sublime

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Abstract

In what follows, I will try to show how the sublime reveals a fundamental aspect of the subject as a human being: a striving to comprehend the absolute. Although at first this striving appears to lead to a futile pursuit – we cannot represent the absolute – we ultimately succeed in presenting it (as a symbol or in art), thus re-affirming the fundamental role of intuition for the human being: the need to make our notions, concepts and ideas tangible. The sublime thus appears to be in close relation to an aesthetic idea, symbols and art, manifesting a profound kinship between reason and the imagination.

Key words

Sublime, feeling, imagination, reason, sensibility, striving, human being.

Introduction

Being human involves being able to appreciate, or rather feel, beauty. This is something that pertains to human beings alone: “Beauty,” Kant writes in the KU, “is valid only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings, but not merely as the latter (e.g., spirits), rather as beings who are at the same time animal” (KU, 5: 210¹). Next to beauty, I

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¹ All references to Kant’s works follow the electronic edition of the University of Bonn, available online at: <https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/kant/>. Abbreviations follow the *Siglenverzeichniss* in “Kant-

would like to add the feeling of the sublime. The sublime discloses a fundamental aspect of being human – one that is even more fundamental than beauty: It reveals a being that strives to transcend its boundaries. This is a being that is neither animal nor rational (or both animal *and* rational) and that strives to attain something that not only evades its grasp but was perhaps never destined to be grasped in the first place: the absolute. It is, after all, the absolute that reason presupposes in all its endeavors pertaining to theoretical knowledge (in the KrV) and to the aesthetic judgment of the sublime (in the KU).

It is interesting to see what – if anything – this striving delivers: If what the subject is striving for is to know (reason) or represent (imagination) the absolute, then this effort proves futile: The sublime is, after all, a testament to this failure. Nevertheless, the subject will, in the end, manage to present – rather than represent² – the absolute, producing an aesthetic idea (KU, 5: 314) or a symbol (KU, 5: 351). I will try to show that, through the sublime, Kant ultimately vindicates sensibility in the aesthetic (he)autonomy³ of the subject. Thus, the sublime not only constitutes a passage from nature to freedom⁴ but manifests the sensible being's constant endeavor to render its notions – concepts and ideas – tangible. It is only through (or in) intuition – either direct (e.g. constructing concepts) or indirect (presenting concepts through symbols) – that we are able to comprehend.

I will first investigate the feeling that the human being's striving produces, which on my view is the feeling of the sublime. This feeling reflects reason's need for and pursuit of – one way or the other – the absolute. I will then proceed to investigate the intense, almost tragic, relation between the imagination and reason. In the KpV, the imagination – and more generally, sensibility – appears to be absolutely subordinate to reason in reason's effort to transcend all sensible inclinations that might influence morality. In the KU, by contrast, there is a shift in the way that reason relates to the imagination: Reason appears to have softened its voice, letting the imagination taste its own freedom and leading to what I

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² A preliminary remark: Unless indicated otherwise, I use the word "representation" as a synonym for image and the word "presentation" as a translation of *Darstellung* (see also: Helfer, 1996: pp. 9-50). Although there may be some conceptual confusion in the way Kant uses the word *Vorstellung* – after all, everything is a *Vorstellung* in some sense, representation being the higher genus (KrV, 4: 203) – the contrast I wish to make is that between image and presentation. *Darstellung* is not synonymous with image, although it involves visual aspects. It is rather a method or a rule akin to the construction or exhibition of concepts in the intuition (KU, 5: 351), a remark that I will elaborate on in what follows.

³ On this reading, reflective judgment in particular, and the power of judgment more generally, appears to be what defines the human being par excellence because it is with the help of the power of reflection that the human being orientates itself in thought – and, subsequently, in the world. More importantly, however, it is in reflection that the human being comes to terms with its sensibility in its entirety: not only intuition but feeling, both being sensible modifications of the subject's situation.

⁴ Guyer (1990) proposes that we read the KU as an introduction to and elaboration of *feeling* as the bridge between nature and freedom. Although I agree that feeling is the link between nature and freedom, feeling nevertheless pertains to a human being – a point Guyer never elaborates on. Furthermore, and although the KU does *fit into a moral framework* (Guyer, 1990: p. 139), what I will try to show is that the aesthetic enjoys a certain (he)autonomy in its own right.

call the vindication of sensibility (paraphrasing Kant's apology for sensibility (APH, 7: 143)). In the final section of the paper, I will try to show what vindicating sensibility might mean: As hinted above, vindicating sensibility means acknowledging that the subject must present all its concepts and ideas, directly or indirectly, in intuition if it is to comprehend them – if it is to obtain some correlate or other for its thinking. This is what being human – that is, having a body or sensibility – ultimately amounts to.

Striving

Reason is driven by a propensity of its nature to go beyond its use in experience, to venture to the outermost bounds of all cognition by means of mere ideas in a pure use, and to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting systematic whole. Now is this striving grounded merely in its speculative interest, or rather uniquely and solely in its practical interest? (KrV, 3: 518)

In this regard the sublime feeling is only the irruption of and thought of this deaf desire for limitlessness. (Lyotard, 1994: p. 55)

There is an interesting parallel between the KrV and the KU, or rather between reason and the imagination, in the two *Critiques*: Both reason and the imagination suffer; they feel a need to overstep their boundaries, and it is this need that leads them to a futile and illusory venture into metaphysics, the dark night (WDO, 8: 137), the *broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion* (KrV, 3: 236). It is this illusion that they will ultimately have to sacrifice if they are to secure a legitimate use: Reason must give up its aspirations to know what lies beyond experience, and the imagination must abandon its own aspirations to represent it. Even though this may be a painful sacrifice, both will prevail, having to re-orientate their function and field of enquiry, disclosing thus their true vocation, the supersensible. This striving, however, is the manifestation of freedom, the freedom to transcend all boundaries.

As we read in the KrV:

For whatever might be the highest degree of perfection at which humanity must stop, and however great a gulf must remain between the idea and its execution, no one can or should try to determine this, just because it is freedom that can go beyond every proposed boundary. (KrV, 3: 248)

What is thus revealed is an asymmetry between an idea of reason and our nature; we always fail to obtain knowledge or to represent or realize this idea of reason: There is an unbridgeable gap that we strive to close. It is in this striving that reason produces its very own principle – the idea of the absolute – and certain feelings: respect, but more

importantly the sublime.⁵ Before enquiring into the kinship between respect and the sublime – and subsequently, morality and aesthetics – however, I would like to sketch an analogy between reason's fate and the fate of the imagination.⁶

There is a peculiar fate that both reason and the imagination share: Both aspire to obtain more than what is possible; both venture into illusion, striving to obtain knowledge or to represent the absolute; both fail and, ultimately, sacrifice their aspirations, delimiting their use, before securing a legitimate claim over their territory, a territory revealed by their striving (to transcend their boundaries). Reason grounds its transcendental principle in its striving to ascend to even higher principles, and the imagination experiences how this striving feels – in the sublime.⁷

In the opening to the Preface to the first edition of the KrV (1781), we find a rather perplexed reason entangled in the incomplete and impossible task of transcending experience and the sensible to secure knowledge of god, immortality, and freedom:

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. (KrV, 3:007)

Even though this is an impossible task (impossible because reason can never acquire knowledge of its ideas), it is one that reason necessarily sets for itself – it is its peculiar fate. Moreover, it is its *right*: Reason has the right to presuppose the supersensible (or rather, supersensible ideas) as its correlate or field of enquiry:

But now there enters *the right* of reason's *need*, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds, and consequently for *orienting* itself in thinking, solely through reason's own need, in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night. (WDO, 8: 137. Also: KrV, 3: 021)

⁵ Angelica Nuzzo rightly points out the kinship between “respect” and the “sublime” in the context of the aesthetic. She describes “respect” as the feeling produced by consciousness of striving towards ideas (Nuzzo, 2008: pp. 312-3); I would add that striving to represent ideas produces a sublime feeling.

⁶ We can expand the proposed analogy between the KrV and the KU to include the KpV or, more generally, Kantian morality, using as a guiding thread the notion of striving – it is reason that is at work everywhere, after all. We strive to grasp the absolute in theory; we strive to promote the highest good (KpV, 5: 84) and to be virtuous (MS, 6: 409) in morality; we strive to represent the absolute in reflection and aesthetic judgment. We strive for an idea that remains – and must remain – unattainable: the idea of the system of knowledge; a postulate or an ideal in morality, and an idea in aesthetics. With this noted, I will remain within the confines of the KrV and the KU in an effort to underline the striking analogy between reason and the imagination.

⁷ Following Zuckert (2007: p. 77), who points out to the First Introduction of the Critique of Judgment, we should acknowledge that the imagination (and the power of judgment) *strives* to ‘rise from intuitions to concepts’ under the guiding principle of *purposiveness*; I am referring however to a different ‘striving’; A striving towards an indeterminate idea (Ibid. p. 316), but, more importantly, the feeling that this striving produces – and this relates, primarily, to the feeling of the sublime.

Reason thus finds itself in the pursuit of something impossible, striving to acquire knowledge of its ideas. But if its ideas are to have a purpose or a legitimate use, reason will have to sacrifice its aspirations to objective knowledge of god, the immortality of the soul, and freedom and must acknowledge these ideas as nothing more than subjective principles – although they are necessary, indeed a priori necessary, not only for theoretical cognition (grounding the necessary idea of a system of cognitions and knowledge as regulative principles)⁸ but, more centrally, for its practical use (grounding morality). It is thus by sacrificing its aspirations to theoretical knowledge that reason can make an absolute claim to its power over nature and ground morality:

Thus, I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith; and the dogmatism of metaphysics, i.e., the prejudice that without criticism reason can make progress in metaphysics, is the true source of all unbelief conflicting with morality, which unbelief is always very dogmatic. (KrV, 3: 019)

Before reason can secure the legitimate use of its ideas – most notably the idea of a free causality that Kant introduces in the third antinomy of pure reason in the KrV, the touchstone of morality – it must find its way through illusion – a necessary and unavoidable illusion, as necessary and unavoidable as its struggle to transcend experience. This illusion consists in hypostasizing the absolute in its various forms – an absolute subject, an absolute totality (the world) and an absolutely necessary being. In other words, reason strives to obtain knowledge of its ideas as if they were objects of experience – which they are not.⁹

Reason must dispense with its own illusions – namely, transcendental illusion – if it is to obtain self-knowledge, delimit its use, and acknowledge that its ideas are not objects of possible experience but subjective principles – principles that have a legitimate use in theoretical cognition as regulative principles and, more importantly, as indispensable to its practical use.

The imagination faces a similar fate: Under the voice of reason (KU, 5: 254), the mind seeks to represent the absolute (totality),¹⁰ and the imagination, striving to transcend its

⁸ See “Anhang zur transscendentalen Dialektik” (KrV, 3: 426). The relation between reason and the power of judgment runs deeper than the feelings they produce – via the imagination – namely the sublime. Purposiveness and systematicity in the KU presuppose reason, building on what in the KrV was only an Appendix to the Dialectic: Reflective judgment thus appears to acquire (theoretical) reason’s logical and transcendental use, disclosing the principles underlying reason’s claim to systematicity – a claim that Kant had explained only logically in the KrV (especially A657/B685ff). See also: Brandt (1989) and Guyer (1990a).

⁹ Knowledge is not a synonym for cognition: We are free to think whatever we like as long as we don’t contradict ourselves, but being able to grasp or think something is not tantamount to knowing it. Knowledge is bound to the possibility of experience that presupposes the categories and the a priori forms of intuition (KrV, 3: 017).

¹⁰ Reason is the faculty of the unconditioned, or the idea of totality or the absolute; I take all these terms to be synonymous in that all three presuppose reason’s demand for completeness: “So, the transcendental concept of reason is none other than that of the totality of conditions to a given conditioned thing. Now since the

limits, ventures to do so as well. Although the imagination will fail, it is nevertheless this striving that will lead it beyond representation, allowing our mind to grasp – and feel – an idea that transcends experience:

But now the mind hears in itself the voice of reason, which requires totality for all given magnitudes, even for those that can never be entirely apprehended although they are (in the sensible representation) judged as entirely given, hence comprehension in *one* intuition, and it demands a *presentation* for all members of a progressively increasing numerical series, and does not exempt from this requirement even the infinite (space and past time), but rather makes it unavoidable for us to think of it (in the judgment of common reason) as *given entirely* (in its totality). (KU, 5: 254)

The feeling of the sublime *pertains* to our state of mind and does not depend on the object; nevertheless, we attribute the concept of the sublime to nature and its objects. In doing so, there arises an illusion, that of sublime nature:

Thus, the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we show to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject), which as it were makes intuitable the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility. (KU, 5: 257)¹¹

It seems almost inevitable that we should hypostasize what is nothing more than a subjective perspective. But isn't this what critical philosophy must do? Guide us – time and again – through illusion? Nevertheless, it is worth noting that we conceive of everything – primarily – as an object (of possible experience), something tangible. We

unconditioned alone makes possible the totality of conditions, and conversely the totality of conditions is always itself unconditioned, a pure concept of reason in general can be explained through the concept of the unconditioned, insofar as it contains a ground of synthesis for what is conditioned" (KrV, 3: 251). Whereas the KrV uses syllogism as reason's vehicle to ascend from the conditioned to the unconditioned, the KU traces the analogous movement of the imagination.

¹¹ The question raised by Clewis (2009: p. 57) is whether the subreption, the illusion that we relate the sublime to an object or nature, is a necessary feature of the sublime. He says that it need not be so since the sublime reveals *freedom* (Ibid.) – not some sort of transcendental, that is, necessary, illusion. It is true that Kant never establishes a critical remedy for the subreption of the sublime in a fashion similar to the Transcendental Dialectic; nevertheless, we must *reflect* on the sublime feeling to comprehend its true nature, namely, that it belongs to the mind and not nature – that is, we need to re-orientate our attention from the object to the mind. This implies that the illusion has a remedy similar to the transcendental one; it demands a re-orientation of our focus, from objects or the world to the function of the mind. But is it unavoidable? If illusion is inherent to reason and reason is at play in the sublime, it is hard to see how illusion cannot be necessary when experiencing a sublime feeling: It appears that the subject tends to hypostasize or attribute everything to the world (either natural or supersensible). But the critique is just this: a reminder or a *constant* struggle against reason's (and the imagination's) pretention to know (or feel) an *object*, something belonging to the world as an object of possible experience (see also Lyotard: 'The critique must always remind thought what it can and cannot know or do in its constant effort to overstep the possibility of experience.' (Lyotard, 1994: p. 56). Hypostasizing ideas or concepts seems unavoidable, but now this fact (the fact that the subject hypostasizes its notions) reveals something more fundamental about the subject: We need – one way or another – to intuit our notions, either directly by constructing them or indirectly by providing symbols or producing aesthetic ideas for them. We will ultimately need some intuition to render our notions comprehensible (this is what being sensible or human consists in) (see also Kirwan, 2006: pp. 99-107). But, as the critic teaches us, we need to acknowledge what belongs to an object of possible experience and what is nothing but a symbol or an analogy, something subjective.

must learn to dispel the illusion and rise above the tangible, and what the sublime reveals, in our present investigation, is *our* vocation, the supersensible – this time, however, not as an idea of reason, as is the case in the KrV, but as a feeling.

To be sure: Our vocation is to become rational and to transcend the sensible. We may as well be on our way towards morality – and this is indeed the case regarding aesthetic judgment. Nevertheless, on closer scrutiny, we discover that the idea of reason that is at play within the sublime is, principally, the idea of humanity – not the theoretical idea of science or system, nor morality. While we have already encountered in the beautiful the idea of a *sensus communis*, that is, the idea of a common sense we share with all other human beings, through which we come to think with and against others within a community (KU, 5: 293), it is in the sublime that the *idea* of humanity is finally disclosed, grounding an idea that is unique to the reflective power of judgment. The idea of humanity thus appears to offer a genuine passage from nature to freedom, a passage that nevertheless lays claims to its own (he)autonomy. And this passage involves the human being.

The being is not yet a rational agent; nor is it (just) the subject of knowledge. It is rather a perspective, that of a corporeal being. It is not just the embodied subject (obviously, this is the case); it is furthermore a subject that grasps the possibility of an a priori idea, that of humanity, and what pertains most intimately to it: feeling. The KU is an enquiry into the possibility of an a priori feeling, after all, and to feel is to have a body:

[Moreover] it cannot be denied that all representations in us, whether they are objectively merely sensible or else entirely intellectual, can nevertheless subjectively be associated with gratification or pain, however unnoticeable either might be (because they all affect the feeling of life, and none of them, insofar as it is a modification of the subject, can be indifferent), or even that, as Epicurus maintained, *gratification* and *pain* are always ultimately corporeal, whether they originate from the imagination or even from representations of the understanding: because life without the feeling of the corporeal organ is merely consciousness of one's existence, but not a feeling of well- or ill-being, i.e., the promotion or inhibition of the powers of life; because the mind for itself is entirely life (the principle of life itself), and hindrances or promotions must be sought outside it, though in the human being himself, hence in combination with his body. (KU, 5: 278)

Kant in the above passage juxtaposes the mere consciousness of one's existence with feeling of the corporeal organ; both however will ultimately have to refer to the human being as an entirety, that is, mind and body. The KU is thus an enquiry of the subject as a corporeal being – at least the aesthetic judgment.

Feeling sublime

I am not interested in reconstructing a Kantian theory of emotions or feelings; what I want to underline is the possibility of an a priori feeling that pertains to a corporeal being that

strives to rise above its nature. I am referring to pleasure and displeasure and, in particular, to the sublime, which captures both aspects of the faculty of pleasure. Striving reveals a fundamental need or lack (displeasure) regarding both reason and the imagination, a need that is ultimately remedied (pleasure).

Is this need a *rational* feeling, as Alix Cohen (2018) maintains?¹² More profoundly, can it *justify* the positive or regulative use of ideas, as she claims?

Considering the above, that is, the fact that feeling pertains to a corporeal being, these questions ultimately appear misplaced: I would rather ask, “Can reason produce a feeling?” Clearly it can, but until the KU we didn’t know – and nor did Kant, for that matter – that an a priori feeling was even possible (with the exception of respect – a point to which I will have to return).

But then what does striving feel like?

I want to claim that this need or pursuit is reflected in the sublime; it is in the feeling of the sublime that Kant reveals how reason effects a feeling on sensibility – the imagination – that is not the moral feeling but one that pertains to a corporeal being. It is through the sublime that we *feel* we are lacking something¹³ – feel a need; it is through the sublime that we feel the pain *because* of this need, and at the same time we soothe this pain the moment we grasp (think) that we are capable of transcending the sensible, thus revealing our supersensible vocation, revealing an idea of reason (we should add that we soothe the pain or comfort ourselves through art and an aesthetic idea – but this is a claim I cannot venture to explore here).

It is not just or primarily the imagination that tries to fulfil reason’s demand – the imagination is, after all, nothing but reason’s instrument; it is the entire mind that hears the voice of reason, and what this voice compels it to do is to comprehend the absolute in one intuition – via the imagination. We are facing the sensuous, or rather the aesthetic aspect of the antinomy of reason, and it is sublime (KU, 5: 254).¹⁴

¹² In WDO, Kant refers to “reason *feeling* its own need” (WDO, 8: 136; my emphasis). Even if we concede – like we do here – that reason does feel, this is not tantamount to *justifying* reason’s use of its ideas, as Alix Cohen claims (2018). In other words, we cannot ground reason’s ideas in a feeling. If reason’s need *justifies* anything, it is its unrest or its flight over and beyond the possibility of experience; its venture into the “immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night” (ibid.). Reason’s felt need (WDO, 8: 140) is shows nothing more than its *insight into its lack* [...] *the drive of cognition it effects* (WDO, 8: 140). This need or feeling must be reflected on if we are to reveal the source of reason’s need (which is the demand for the absolute). We must, in other words, reveal reason’s peculiar (logical) structure – the syllogism – which allows it to grasp the absolute and the idea as its own particular principle. What justifies reason’s right, in other words, is the demand for the absolute and the structure of syllogism. It sounds rather odd to say that a feeling *determines* reason’s movement. Granted: we must reflect upon this feeling, but this doesn’t mean that feeling *justifies* anything.

¹³ Lyotard describes this lack as *nostalgia* for Forms and Ideas (we could add: for the absolute) (Lyotard, 1994 : p. 75).

¹⁴ We might (in an awkward kind of way) say that we feel an antinomy of reason– and this feeling is sublime. We could further relate the antinomy to the sight of the starry heavens; to comprehend the universe is, after

Reason compels the imagination to respond to its pursuit, leading the latter towards a striving of its own, pushing it beyond the sensible. If the logical use of reason – in which reason continuously ascends, with syllogism as its vehicle, to more general principles until it grasps the idea of a totality – can find an analog it is here, in the movement of the imagination, which is also the mind’s movement.

But what does a sublime feeling signify?

The feeling of the sublime has a twofold structure: We first feel displeasure or pain – when the imagination fails to comprehend¹⁵ the absolute in a single intuition; but in failing to do so, we are able to grasp, secondly, a presupposition that evades all intuition, the absolute, thus producing pleasure, albeit indirectly: Our mind is overwhelmed with the feeling of its supersensible vocation:

[The feeling of the sublime] is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them; hence as an emotion it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination. Hence it is also incompatible with charms, and, 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, i.e., it deserves to be called negative pleasure. (KU, 5: 245)

The above description and the twofold structure of the sublime brings to mind the feeling of respect.

There is a structural analogy between respect and the sublime in that both are described first and primarily as negative feelings that nevertheless produce, albeit indirectly, a positive feeling or pleasure (KpV, 5: 73). In both respect and feeling we find pleasure in the intellectual or supersensible: in an idea of reason. But what is the nature of this

all, to strive towards representing a totality, the world. I will have more to say on the sight of the starry heavens in what follows.

¹⁵ Kant elaborates on the difference between apprehension and comprehension in KU, §26: “To take up a quantum in the imagination intuitively, in order to be able to use it as a measure or a unit for the estimation of magnitude by means of numbers, involves two actions of this faculty: *apprehension* (*apprehensio*) and *comprehension* (*comprehensio aesthetica*). There is no difficulty with apprehension, because it can go on to infinity; but comprehension becomes ever more difficult the further apprehension advances, and soon reaches its maximum, namely the aesthetically greatest basic measure for the estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has gone so far that the partial representations of the intuition of the senses that were apprehended first already begin to fade in the imagination as the latter proceeds on to the apprehension of further ones, then it loses on one side as much as it gains on the other, and there is in the comprehension a greatest point beyond which it cannot go” (KU, 5: 252). What emerges from the above passage is a contrast between the apprehension of a magnitude, that is, a numerical progression that can proceed to infinity, and the comprehension of the same magnitude in a single intuition or a whole. Although it is obvious that the imagination fails to comprehend (not apprehend) magnitudes that supersede a certain limit, it is precisely at this limit, *which the imagination strives to surpass*, that we feel the sublime. This is *aesthetic comprehension*, where the imagination comprehends a plurality at a glance and unites, or rather tries to unite, this plurality in a single intuition (Makkree, 1984. Also: Gasche, 2003). It is at this point that reason comes into play and the mathematical infinite is transformed into an idea (see: Rogozinski, 1993).

affinity? Does respect have priority, such that the sublime is, ultimately, subsumed under morality and respect? Isn't it Kant who, after all, related the two? The sublime aligns itself with the practical ideas of reason (KU, 5: 265), preparing us to *esteem something* (*etwas*), to respect it (*hochzuschätzen*) (KU, 5: 267) – even nature. But the sublime is akin to *enthusiasm* rather than respect (KU, 5: 272); respect may be sublime, but sublime is not identical to respect.

Be that as it may, the sublime in the KU constitutes a genuine aesthetic passage from nature to freedom that is neither theoretical nor practical. This passage from theory to practical reason presupposes sensibility or human nature; we must address the human being as a whole,¹⁶ not just one of its faculties, as the possibility of this passage. This means that there is no one faculty that constitutes a common ground of the subject; if there is one, we might want to point to the faculty of reflective judgment not as a common ground but as the possibility of the critique itself in that it is through transcendental reflection that we assign given representations to their appropriate faculties (aa04: 173). We cannot follow Rogozinski, who, following Heidegger, acknowledges the imagination as the possibility of the a priori unity of the faculties (Rogozinski, 1993: pp. 134-5).¹⁷ If we are to recognize the subject as (he)autonomous, we need to address it as a whole. We need to address our finitude, and this involves primarily addressing the corporeal being – a being that intuits and for which intuition constitutes the possibility of supplementing not only the categories of the understanding with objectivity but, in addition, the ideas of reason with intuitions, without running the risk of mysticism or superstition (KU, 5: 275).¹⁸

¹⁶ On this reading, we might acknowledge the human being per se as the passage or the bridge between nature and freedom; the sought-after unity of the faculties might therefore lie within the human being. Or, to paraphrase Katerina Deligiorgi (2004), it is in the KU that we encounter a being that integrates different aspects of itself, “passive and active, being finite and also capable of setting ends – and of our experience, as part of the natural world and responsive to it as we set ends in accordance to our own idea” (Deligiorgi, 2014: p. 32).

¹⁷ In Rogozinski's interpretation (1993), everything revolves around the imagination; i.e. we hardly encounter reason, even where it might be expected that we should. Rogozinski says that “the imagination demands totality,” but this can't be so: It is reason at work, demanding that the imagination comprehend totality; it is the *voice of reason that the mind hears* (KU, 5: 254).

¹⁸ One is tempted to say that the KU is not a treatise about the *transcendence* of finitude – given that, as Makkreel (1984) points out, the sublime suspends temporality – but a treatise about what it actually means to be finite, or sensible. And this does not involve only *time* but *space* as well: We are after all, as corporeal beings, primarily in space!

A glimpse at the starry heavens

In fact, when we have completely filled our dispositions with such observations and with what has been brought out previously, then the sight of a starry heaven on a clear night gives a kind of pleasure which only noble souls experience. In the universal stillness of nature and the tranquility of the mind, the immortal soul's hidden capacity to know speaks an unnamable language and provides inchoate ideas which are certainly felt but are incapable of being described. If among thinking creatures of this planet there are malicious beings who, regardless of all incitements which such a great subject can offer, are nevertheless in the condition of being stuck firmly in the service of vanity, how unfortunate this sphere is that it could produce such miserable creatures! But, on the other hand, how lucky this sphere is that a way lies open, under conditions which are the worthiest of all to accept, to reach a blissful happiness and nobility, something infinitely far above the advantages which the most beneficial of all nature's arrangements in all planetary bodies can attain! (NTH, 1: 367-8)

It is not just the moral law that produces the feeling of the sublime (via respect) on Kant's view; it is the sight of the starry heavens as well.

We read in the KpV:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. The first begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense and extends the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and moreover into the unbounded times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their duration. The first view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital force (one knows not how) must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came. (KpV, 5: 162)

There is something majestic in the sight of the starry heavens in the above passage: The *unbounded magnitude of worlds and systems*; at the same time however, the image of the starry heavens reveals the insignificance of my animal nature – it annihilates me; the representation thus of the starry heavens functions primarily on a level akin to morality rather than aesthetics.

The same image returns in the KU, but this time Kant's voice has changed; the sublime feeling is there, but now what emerges is a different understanding of the intuition of the heavens – an aesthetic one:

Thus, if someone calls the sight of the starry heavens *sublime*, he must not ground such a judging of it on concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings, taking the bright points with which we see the space above us to be filled as their suns, about which they move in their purposively appointed orbits, but must take it, as we see it, merely as a broad, all-embracing

vault; and it must be merely under this representation that we posit the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment attributes to this object. (KU, 5: 270)

We should add: One must not ground the sight of the starry heavens in any concept whatsoever, even reason's practical ideas. We have shifted – or rather Kant has shifted – our attention from morality to aesthetics and from practical reason to reason per se as the source of the idea of the absolute; more importantly, Kant has shifted our attention to the feeling that this striving towards the absolute produces.¹⁹ We need no longer experience our place within the heavens as insignificant; we just feel the sublime. We cannot intuit or construct the world as a totality in our intuition – this is impossible; nevertheless, we can estimate it aesthetically.²⁰ We might say: We feel reason's ascent towards the absolute; we feel the antinomy and resolve it, aesthetically.²¹

Reason has, finally, embraced the imagination – and subsequently the human being. This wasn't always the case: Reason was previously described as being hard on sensibility, exercising its undisputed dominion over it.

In the KpV, reason appears to exercise a rather raw violence upon the sensible, humiliating it:

Humiliation on the sensible side – is an elevation of the moral – that is, practical – esteem for the law itself on the intellectual side. (KpV, 5: 79)

Kant here refers to inclinations, arrogance and vain self-love (KpV, 5: 86), rejecting them as grounds for determining the will, that is, morality or practical reason. Still, the human being is something that must be humiliated, struck down, if we are to become moral beings. It seems that this being is nothing but a self-loving arrogant being that needs to be

¹⁹ It is interesting to see how an aesthetic judgment works: *We choose* to see the representation of the skies without interest – to reflect is, after all, to assign a given representation to a specific power, be it the understanding, reason or, in the KU, the power of judgment (see KrV, 03: 214). And this reflection depends upon *our* perspective: “The satisfaction in the object depends on the relation in which we would place the imagination: namely, that it entertains the mind by itself in free activity” (KU, 5: 270-1). Kant repeatedly speaks of the effect of the object upon us as an occasion for setting in motion our faculties (KU, 5: 218 / 5: 256) – and this holds both for the KU and for the KrV (3: 027). It is an occasion that brings forth in consciousness the workings of our mind.

²⁰ Is the fact that we cannot construct the concept of a totality – or the absolute – tantamount to a formless object? Do we, in other words, experience the sublime when looking at an object *without* form? Kant does indeed suggest this, but it may not be exclusively the case that we feel sublime when gazing upon something formless. Formlessness may refer either to a lack or an excess.

²¹ Kant's exposition of the sublime follows the structure and divisions of the Antinomy of pure Reason; that is, he divides the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical, alluding to pure reason per se – not practical reason. But the structural analogy with the antinomies runs even deeper. The mathematical sublime poses the question of an infinite magnitude and resolves this problem, as it were, aesthetically. We comprehend the infinite aesthetically (KU, 5: 256); that is, we estimate the absolute aesthetically (although we can never construct the concept of the absolute in intuition). The same holds for the dynamical sublime: We feel our power to transcend nature and the numerous threats it poses (5: 260); we thus appear to *feel* our freedom, our independence, in a way that is analogous to securing the concept of a free causality in the third Antinomy of pure Reason.

humiliated not only to overcome its inclinations but also to find its proper place in the world – its triviality.

We saw above that even the sight of the heavens is destined to diminish the animal being:

The first view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature*, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital force (one knows not how) must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came. (KU, 5: 162)

But that is exactly what I am: I am, above all else, an animal, or rather a corporeal being.

One might object that in the KpV Kant must be resolute if he is to ensure that what determines our will is nothing but the moral law; in the KU, by contrast, Kant describes the interaction of the faculties as being either playful or serious. Nevertheless, the sublime feeling of the starry heavens need not annihilate us. We need no longer be humiliated. Indeed, in the KU Kant no longer speaks of humiliation; rather, he speaks of sacrifice.²²

Practical reason restricts or humiliates every natural inclination, ultimately humiliating the human being (KpV, 5: 74), exhibiting the horrific face of reason's dominion over the sensible. In the KU, by contrast, reason, through the imagination, chooses a different path. To be sure, the violence is still here, but this time it is an ambiguous violence – even the imagination does violence to time, or our inner sense (KU, 5: 259). This resembles a drama, an ordeal, or some sort of sublime experience where we learn that we need to sacrifice the unrestrained freedom of our imagination if we are to disclose and – more importantly – to respond to our vocation. We feel sadness or pain, suffering a loss. It is a loss that the imagination does not suffer alone, though; we feel our inability to comprehend totality or the infinite, and although we are elevated, reconfirming reason's supremacy over sensibility, reason has nevertheless changed, having already suffered its own loss: its pretension to obtain theoretical knowledge of the absolute (KU, 5: 219).

²² This shift in reason's perspective – from humiliation in the KpV to sacrifice in the KU – is an important witness to Kant's gradual understanding of the role that sensibility plays. We are already familiar (from the KrV) with the priority of "sensation" as *representation standing under the genus in general*, that is, representation in general; "sensation" refers to the modification of the state of the subject, prior to "cognition" (KrV, 4: 203). This means that, prior to any act or exercise of our cognitive powers, cognition, or knowledge, the subject is modified while encountering experience (KrV, 3: 027). A perception (*perceptio*) that refers to the modification of the subject's state is a sensation (*Empfindung*). In the KrV, sensation is "the effect of an object on the capacity for representation, insofar as we are affected by it." In the KrV, Kant does not yet entertain the possibility of the effect of the subject upon itself, or, if he does, he does not acknowledge any necessary grounds pertaining to feeling (*Gefühl*) – "feeling," in other words, is a modification of the subject and its subjective constitution of mind (*Zustand*) and can be different for different people (KrV, 4: 035). This is no longer the case in the KU, however: Feeling appears to acquire a necessary and universal – albeit subjective – status, and it does so by presupposing the possibility of universal communicability. It is not enough to acknowledge that the subject feels; what is required is that this feeling can be communicated. Next to "sensation" we should thus add "feeling" as a modification of the subject. The KU shows that feeling can be grounded a priori. Failing to discern this shift in Kant's thought, as Angelica Nuzzo appears to do, for example (Nuzzo, 2008: pp. 312-3), obscures the aesthetic (he)autonomy of the subject that I have defended thus far.

Either way, the true target was probably a different one all along: It was not the human being per se but rather its inclination towards self-love (but this will not become clear before the KU). We read in the KpV:

All the inclinations together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then called one's own happiness) constitute regard for oneself (*solipsismus*). This is either the self-regard of *love for oneself*, a predominant *benevolence* toward oneself (*Philautia*), or that of *satisfaction with oneself*, (*arrogantia*). The former is called, in particular, *self-love*; the latter, *self-conceit*. Pure practical reason merely *infringes upon* self-love, inasmuch as it only restricts it, as natural and active in us even prior to the moral law, to the condition of agreement with this law, and then it is called *rational self-love*. But it *strikes down* self-conceit altogether. (KpV, 5: 73)

This is the same demand that an aesthetic judgment of beauty makes, and the sublime reinforces, against our sensible interest or our interest in general – let us keep in mind that the sublime is not just without purpose, like beauty; it is even counter-purposive:

The beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even contrary to our (sensible) interest. (KU, 5: 265ff)

If a judgment of taste is to demand apriority, necessity and universality, then it must rise above egoism, aesthetic egoism, and become pluralistic,²³ acquiring a universal voice (KU, 5: 278).²⁴

Nevertheless, the encounter between reason and imagination remains problematic when it comes to aesthetic judgment: The imagination proves unable to comprehend its object after all. This is perhaps not unexpected since reason is at work operating as a presupposition of the imagination and guiding the latter with its ideas, which not only do not correspond to any possible intuitions or experience but must remain without any – if we are to avoid mysticism or fanaticism. This means that the imagination cannot represent an idea of reason. Still, Kant speaks of – a rather odd – *negative presentation*:

There need be no anxiety that the feeling of the sublime will lose anything through such an abstract presentation, which becomes entirely negative in regard to the sensible; for the imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that very reason

²³ As we read in Kant's Anthropology: "Egoism can contain three kinds of presumptions: the presumption of understanding, of taste, and of practical interest; that is, it can be logical, aesthetic, or practical. [...] The aesthetic egoist is satisfied with his own taste, even if others find his verses, paintings, music, and similar things ever so bad, and criticize or even laugh at them. He deprives himself of progress toward that which is better when he isolates himself with his own judgment; he applauds himself and seeks the touchstone of artistic beauty only in himself" (Anth, 07: 129–130).

²⁴ Communicability is the corollary of the universality that a concept of the understanding or a law of reason reflects – although communicability is only a subjective a priori representation, it grounds the necessity and universality of an aesthetic judgment (KU, 5: 238, 5: 293). We thus claim to speak in a universal voice, demanding that everyone ought to agree with us; this does not mean that everyone actually does. Nevertheless, it is the a priori necessity of communicability that grounds a priori aesthetic judgments.

can never be anything other than a merely negative presentation, which nevertheless expands the soul. (KU, 5: 274)

We may thus be unable to *represent* the absolute we can, however, *present* it in a *negative* fashion; this sounds rather vague!

Vindicating sensibility

Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment:
Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth, etc. (KU, 5: 274)

After experiencing such a devastating failure, unable to comprehend in one intuition totality or the infinite – the absolute – the imagination appears to finally be at peace, free, unbounded in reason’s embrace;²⁵ the price it had to pay was to renounce representation (Kant speaks of a “negative presentation,” something that is empty).

To safeguard the absolute and retain its non-intuitive character, we must appeal to a negative presentation (if we are to avoid enthusiasm and mysticism); yet, as I hope to show, one way or another we will ultimately need to present the absolute in intuition – not as an image or a representation, but as a symbol; negative in that it does not correspond to anything; still, a presentation in that it is the product of the imagination.

Contrasting an image or a representation with the (transcendental) workings of the imagination is not new to Kant; we saw in the KrV that a schema – the product of transcendental imagination – is something like a monogram of *pure a priori imagination*. It is not an image, but rather the rule of synthesis of the imagination:

We can say only this much: the image is a product of the empirical faculty of productive imagination, the schema of sensible concepts (such as figures in space) is a product and as it were a monogram of pure a priori imagination, through which and in accordance with which the images first become possible, but which must be connected with the concept, to which they are in themselves never fully congruent, always only by means of the schema that they designate. The schema of a pure concept of the understanding, on the contrary, is something that can never be brought to an image at all, but is rather only the pure synthesis, in accord with a rule of unity according to concepts in general, which the category expresses, and is a transcendental product of the imagination. (KrV 3: 136)

²⁵ To be unbounded or without limits is not tantamount to being without form; the sublime – according to Kant’s hint (KU, 5: 245) – is usually related to the formless. I prefer to interpret “formless” or the “unbounded” as “without limits,” however, not as “without form,” following both Gasche (2013) and Kant’s suggestion (ibid.).

“Monogram” is also the word that Kant uses to describe how the imagination operates within the rather ambiguous notion of a “sensible ideal” in the Transcendental Dialectic of the KrV:

That is how it is with the ideal of reason, which always rests on determinate concepts and must serve as a rule and an original image, whether for following or for judging. It is entirely otherwise with the creatures of imagination, of which no one can give an explanation or an intelligible concept; they are, as it were, monograms, individual traits, though not determined through any assignable rule, constituting more a wavering sketch, as it were, which mediates between various appearances, than a determinate image, such as what painters and physiognomists say they have in their heads, and is supposed to be an incommunicable silhouette of their products or even of their critical judgments. These images can, though only improperly, be called ideals of sensibility because they are supposed to be the unattainable model for possible empirical intuitions, and yet at the same time they are not supposed to provide any rule capable of being explained or tested. (KrV, 3: 384-5)

A sensible ideal is obviously related to reason – being an ideal – but, at the same time, it is a creature of the imagination. Being a creature of the imagination, the sensible ideal is discredited as incommunicable, unattainable as a model, incapable of providing rules for explaining or putting to the test. Strictly speaking it is not an ideal, and if it bears the name *ideal* it does so *improperly*. The sensible ideal is sharply contrasted to the idea and ideal of reason, where the idea *gives a rule* (completeness) and the ideal provides the archetype or original image (ibid.) of a thing *in individuo* (ibid.). This is to be expected:

To try to realize the ideal in an example, i.e., in appearance, such as that of the sage in a novel, is not feasible, and even has about it something nonsensical and not very edifying, since the natural limits which constantly impair the completeness in the idea render impossible every illusion in such an attempt, and thereby render even what is good in the idea suspect by making it similar to a mere fiction [...] (ibid.)

One could venture to ask what an archetype or an original image *looks* like, but Kant never elaborates on the notion of an original *image*.

It appears that in the KrV the imagination has nothing whatsoever to do with the representation (even more, the presentation) of an idea or an ideal of reason; even the slightest effort to render an idea tangible (i.e. an appearance) is deemed illusory. What is striking, however, is that the features that render the sensible idea a fiction or a creature of the imagination reappear in the KU under a different light. Artistic expression is no longer incommunicable; nor is the absence of an explanation or, more importantly, a determinate rule a problem (Zammito, 1992: p. 285).²⁶ This is exactly what an aesthetic judgment

²⁶ Zammito (1992) writes that the real problem is the possibility of an a priori or transcendental grounding of feeling. In the KrV, Kant appears not to entertain such a possibility (either neglecting feeling or denying such a possibility). It is only after 1789 that the possibility of a transcendental ground of feeling begins to emerge, culminating in the KU.

refers to: It does not determine anything or set an objective universal rule, but it is nonetheless a priori and necessary, and, more importantly, it is no longer a fiction.

Not only does the ideal of beauty become *the sensible manifestation of an idea* (Angelica Nuzzo, 2006: p. 300), i.e. beauty as the symbol of morality (KU, 5: 351), but, in addition, there emerges the notion of an aesthetic idea (KU, 5: 232) as the *standard* or *criterion* by which we judge an object aesthetically, supplementing theoretical reason with an aesthetic standard or criterion (something like an archetype to which we measure all other images). The sublime does set such an aesthetic standard, and reason has at last found the aesthetic counterpart to its ideas.²⁷

Following Martha Helfer (1996), we could say that, as the presentation of the rule of the imagination's synthesis, the negative presentation manifests our striving to present the idea of reason (Helfer, 1996: p. 45).²⁸ We will soon find out, however, that we are able to present an idea – our striving – not only negatively but also positively: through an aesthetic idea (and consequently, art).

Kant not only welcomes an aesthetic idea but endows it with a force that is equal to that of an idea of reason:

An aesthetic idea cannot become a cognition, because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate. An *idea of reason* can never become a cognition, because it contains a *concept* (of the supersensible) for which no suitable intuition can ever be given.

Now I believe that one could call the aesthetic idea an *inexponible* representation of the imagination, the idea of reason, however, an *indemonstrable* concept of reason. Of both it is presupposed that they are not entirely groundless, but rather (in accordance with the above explanation of an idea in general) are generated in accordance with certain principles of the cognitive faculty to which they belong (the former according to subjective principles, the latter to objective ones). (KU, 5: 342)

An aesthetic idea – this creature of the imagination – resembles a sensible ideal in that it cannot be determined by any concepts, but this time it can be explained – referring to the reflective power of judgment. It has apriority, necessity and universality; that is, it is communicable and sets an (ideal) rule, albeit only paradigmatically. In the KU, the aesthetic idea no longer mediates between various images but rather appears to mediate between various concepts, expanding thought to what is an inexhaustible concept, thus resembling the indefinite character of reason's ideas:

[...] by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be

²⁷ Gasche (2013) goes as far as to claim that the idea of totality or an idea of reason is already at play throughout the entire aesthetic judgment (including beauty).

²⁸ See also: Zuckert, 2007 : p. 316.

adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. – One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an *idea of reason*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (representation of the imagination) can be adequate. (KU, 5: 314)

An aesthetic idea eludes language, even comprehensibility – but it is no longer akin to an *incommunicable silhouette*, like the sensible idea. It is rather what moves thought, enlarging it:

Now if we add to a concept a representation of the imagination that belongs to its presentation, but which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way, then in this case the imagination is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is, at the instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object). (KU, 5: 315)

The key to understanding the above is to appreciate the significance of exhibition (*Darstellung*) in the KU.

We already know from the KrV that to exhibit (*darstellen*) an object is to construct it a priori in intuition. This is the case with mathematics: We construct or exhibit a priori in intuition the concept of a triangle, for example (see KrV, 3: 032 / 3: 468), and this is possible because space is an a priori intuition. Far from being an image or a representation, e.g. a picture or an image of a specific triangle, exhibiting (a triangle) is an act or a process by which the imagination mediates between intuition and understanding to present a concept in concreto; it is, moreover, a rule of synthesis, construing the triangle as a singular presentation of the concept “triangle”:

The schema of the triangle can never exist anywhere except in thought, and signifies a rule of the synthesis of the imagination with regard to pure shapes in space. (KrV, 3: 136)²⁹

The mediating role of the imagination between intuition and understanding and its affinity with the power of judgment does not become clear, though, until the KU.

Here, Kant uses the general concept of “hypotyposis” to subsume both schema and symbol under it; the schematism and symbolization are two of the most prominent features of imagination:

All *hypotyposis* (presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*), as making something sensible, is of one of two kinds: either *schematic*, where to a concept grasped by the understanding the corresponding intuition is given *a priori*; or *symbolic*, where to a concept which only reason can think, and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, an intuition is attributed with which the power of judgment proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in

²⁹ Kant never identifies presentation with synthesis, but it is safe to identify presentation with the act of the imagination; the schema thus becomes almost synonymous with presentation. This is made clear in the KU, where *hypotyposis* is identified with presentation (either schematic or symbolic) (KU, 5: 351 / §59) (see also Arno Schubach, 2017).

schematization, i.e., it is merely the rule of this procedure, not of the intuition itself, and thus merely the form of the reflection, not the content, which corresponds to the concept. (KU, 5: 315)

“Hypotyposis,” as a general feature of the power of judgment and the imagination, captures an important feature of transcendental philosophy: a need to make something sensible or tangible and, consequently, the importance of sensibility. Although Kant refers to the power of judgment – it is the power of judgment that subsumes, determines and reflects, after all – it is nonetheless obvious that it is the imagination that is at work when producing schema and, by analogy, symbols.³⁰

What emerges thus far is a constellation of interrelated family concepts: an aesthetic idea, a symbol, and the sublime.³¹ Their affinity lies, on the one hand, in that they presuppose reason and its a priori principle of the absolute or totality: All manifest the striving (the sublime) and, ultimately, the achievement of the imagination in presenting an idea of reason (aesthetic ideas and symbols present the absolute, albeit indirectly). On the other hand, they presuppose the imagination in its productive power.³² The sublime is the feeling produced by the imagination’s failure to represent totality and the subsequent revelation of its freedom; both aesthetic ideas and symbols are manifestations or presentations of the imagination’s freedom in that it produces a presentation that mobilizes thinking, expanding it to an inexhaustible multitude of concepts (KU, 5: 314 / KU, 5: 352) and thus resembling an idea of reason.

Although reason’s ideas cannot be directly presented, or represented, they welcome an indirect presentation as aesthetic ideas or symbols. One way or another, we presuppose a tangible presentation or image that can comprehend – directly or indirectly – every given concept or idea, and it is the imagination that, having suffered the sacrifice of its representing power, recovers as the creative or productive power par excellence. It is in the face of the imagination that sensibility and, ultimately, the human being are finally vindicated.

Thus, imagination emerges as a *self-active* (KU, 5: 240), productive, and creative power that seems to possess a freedom in its own right, one that allows it to finally step beyond nature, creating another one:

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it. We entertain ourselves with

³⁰ The role of the imagination in transcendental philosophy deserves a separate exposition. Here I rely on Horstmann’s analysis (2018). See also the work of Eliane Escoubas, where both the imagination and the power of judgment function as mediating terms between Kant’s dichotomies (Escoubas, 1993: p. 56).

³¹ As Makkreel (1997) notes, the sublime foreshadows an aesthetic idea in that it demands an aesthetic comprehension of totality. See also Martha B. Helfer (1996).

³² It is a hidden “kraft,” as Kant says in the KrV (4: 101), within the depths of the human soul. I think that, following the movement of the imagination in the KU, we remove its almost mystical mantle and see it for what it is: the imagination’s creative power.

it when experience seems too mundane to us; we transform the latter, no doubt always in accordance with analogous laws, but also in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason (and which are every bit as natural to us as those in accordance with which the understanding apprehends empirical nature); in this we feel our freedom from the law of association (which applies to the empirical use of that faculty), in accordance with which material can certainly be lent to us by nature, but the latter can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature. (KU, 5: 314)³³

Although what the imagination initially feels is *a deprivation of its freedom* – in the aesthetic judgment of the sublime (KU, 5: 269) – it ultimately responds to its sacrifice and feels a sublime pleasure: It is here that the spirit's or mind's (*Gemüt*) free activity is manifested:

Aesthetic purposiveness is the lawfulness of the power of judgment in its *freedom*. The satisfaction in the object depends on the relation in which we would place the imagination: namely, that it entertains the mind by itself in free activity. (KU, 5: 271)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show how the KU sets in motion the mind or spirit (*Geist*); I have claimed that the spirit mobilizes itself while striving to overstep all boundaries in its effort to comprehend the absolute; it is in this striving – experienced as feeling in the sublime – that we disclose our vocation and, at the same, the idea of humanity; we can thus speak of a striving human being but also of a being that must strive to become human. Both efforts converge in taste, and the sublime is the feeling that reflects this pursuit – the asymmetry between idea and nature and our effort to attain the idea over and above our nature.

The human being of the KU is no longer a suffering being like that in the KpV; it is not a being that must not only rise above its sensibility but also struggle against it in its effort to become the rational agent of morality, free from its inclinations. No, the human being of the KU is one that embraces its sensibility – vindicates it (through the imagination). It is a being that needs to intuit concepts and ideas to be able to comprehend them – and ultimately, itself. More importantly, it is a being that is in constant movement.

On the one hand, the epistemological or transcendental subject of knowledge – despite being spontaneous – synthesizes according to rules of the understanding; the conditions of the possibility of experience and its objects secure knowledge of the world – a rather static or stable image of the world. On the other hand, the practical subject of morality – despite being free – must conform to the moral law (if it is to act rationally). Both subjects, the theoretical and the practical, result in a certain solidification; the aesthetic subject, by contrast – if I may call it that – seems rather unsolidified, liquefied, seems to be in motion,

³³ See also 7: 167ff. (§28. On the power of imagination).

to embrace paradoxical notions such as purposiveness without purpose or something that repels and yet attracts at the same time (the sublime).

Beauty animates the spirit's powers (KU, 5: 222 / 5: 239); it is the sublime, however, that sets the spirit in an almost frantic motion (KU, 5: 247). It vibrates it; it repels and at the same time attracts it: It allows it to feel the abyss. In the imagination's effort to comprehend the absolute it discovers its own freedom, and although reason prohibits us from representing the absolute, the imagination ultimately succeeds in presenting – rather than representing – it. Art or an aesthetic idea sets the spirit in motion and lets it feel pleasure in its freedom (EEKU, 20: 238 / KU, 5: 247 / KU, 5: 328-9).

Reason in the KrV experienced a similar dizziness in its effort to conceive of a comprehensive notion of all knowledge and concepts (the idea of totality), ascending to higher and higher principles until it grasped (in its own movement of the syllogism), its appropriate principle – the idea. But it is in the KU that we feel this ascent: It is not reason but rather the imagination that sets out to transcend every boundary in its effort to represent the idea of reason. Its failure (producing a negative feeling) is at the same time its achievement: The imagination feels its limitlessness and, ultimately, its freedom (producing at the same time a positive feeling) – and this feeling is the sublime. What is more, its failure and its negative feeling is, at the same time, a positive one since we do not only grasp our supersensible vocation but we ultimately succeed in presenting (as an aesthetic idea) the idea of totality, securing, this way, pleasure.

Reflecting thus on the feeling of the sublime we reclaim the human being as a whole, both rational and animal, that is, corporeal; a being that strives to obtain the absolute and finally succeeds, albeit only aesthetically.³⁴

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³⁴ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments that helped improve this paper.

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