

IN SEARCH OF THE SUBLIME

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Boredom is the root of all evil” says the fictional author ‘A’ in Søren Kirkegaard’s *Either/Or*. With his poetic irony, Kirkegaard gives boredom pride’s place, but not without reason. Aside from Kirkegaard, many philosophers, artists, and novelists have drawn attention to the malaise of modernity and have pointed to the Enlightenment ideal of autonomy as its cause. Enlightened man tossed off the yoke of tradition, reached for the freedom of the autonomous self, and upon entering the void of total self-determination discovered that his feet could no longer find traction to flee from the inevitable onrush of ennui. Having made himself the measure of reality, man took its measure and found it all quite boring.

Although this boredom continues to plague us today, it is not for want of an available remedy. As that which provokes astonishment, admiration, and awe, the sublimity of God has the power to awaken man from his melancholy. By meditation on the divine sublimity, man may once again tremble with the excitement of reverential fear and rediscover the power that dispels the boredom that begins with pride. This article will examine this remedy, by investigating the nature of the sublime and its proper effect. Employing the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Gift of Fear, I will propose that it is God who is most properly sublime, and it is through filial fear that man responds to his sublimity with a heart alive and awake to the joyful exigency of praise.

THE HISTORY OF THE SUBLIME

When the sublime is discussed in the context of aesthetics, examples are usually given from nature or from monumental

architectural achievements. The sheer cliffs of an Alpine pass and the magnificent vaults of a gothic cathedral are not only beautiful, but they inspire an amazement and wonder that exceeds the mere delight of beauty. This quality is easy enough to recognize, but it proves more difficult to give a precise definition or account of its causes. What exactly brings beauty into the awe-inspiring realm of the sublime? The consensus of most philosophers who have considered this question is that the sublime differs from the beautiful in that it not only causes delight, but fear. The sublime is *fearfully beautiful*, and though it may be perceived with delight, this delight is not far from terror.

In his treatise *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke examines the sensible effects of the beautiful and the sublime to show that they are distinct, rooted in two contrary passions. According to Burke, the beautiful is grounded in the love of pleasure, while the sublime is founded on the fear of pain. While the beautiful is the cause of pleasure and delight, the sublime is the cause of astonishment and fear. Writing at the dawn of the Romantic period, Burke's analysis of the sublime begins with the passions and then proceeds to denote common properties that can be observed in those things that evoke them.

Burke finds that, of all the human passions, astonishment is most properly associated with what we call sublime. Astonishment is that state of soul in which all of the soul's motions are suspended, and the mind becomes totally occupied by the sublime object and filled with fear. In addition to this chief effect of what is called sublime, Burke lists admiration, respect, and reverence as its inferior effects. Both the primary and the inferior effects of the sublime are rooted in one way or another in the passion of fear, which thus serves as the principle of all the passions arising from the encounter with the sublime. As Burke notes, fear most powerfully arrests the mind and lies at the root of admiration, respect, and reverence.

Next, Burke categorizes the properties of the sublime that evoke this fearful astonishment. Although he lists many properties, they can all be reduced to power and infinitude. According to Burke,

power is the “branch stock” of all that is sublime, for power above all suggests the idea of danger, which gives rise to fear. Infinitude is also a chief property of the sublime because that which is infinite transcends the limits of man’s comprehension, giving rise to the fear of the great unknown.

Burke relates infinitude to obscurity since it is the form incompletely comprehended that most effectively suggests infinitude to the imagination. The obscure, veiled, and partially hidden power suggests a potentially infinite danger, which leads to the fear of astonishment. Infinitude is most closely connected with greatness, and the other properties of greatness listed by Burke suggest infinitude in some capacity. Vastness, magnitude, difficulty of construction, magnificence, and harmonious repetition all suggest greatness, because they lead the mind to what is limitless and unfathomable.

Taking account of Burke’s analysis of the passions and properties associated with the sublime, the following initial definition can be given: A thing is sublime to the degree to which it manifests power and infinitude and gives rise to astonishment, admiration, and reverential fear. Having arrived at this initial definition, the question remains as to the metaphysical and moral implications of sublimity, but Burke is unwilling to pursue such questions further, for in his opinion, “when we go but one step beyond the immediate sensible qualities of things we go out of our depth.” The goal of Burke’s treatise is modest, for he dares not venture into metaphysical speculation, but contents himself with empirical observation. Keeping Burke’s observations in mind, let us venture forth where he feared to tread, with St. Thomas as our guide.

ST. THOMAS AND THE FEAR OF THE SUBLIME

St. Thomas may seem an unlikely guide in this endeavor. Excluding Scriptural citations, St. Thomas uses the word sublime (*sublimis*) only once in the entirety of his *Summa Theologiae*, and this occurrence does not even occur in a question directly pertaining to sublimity, for he asked no such question. This single occurrence

of “sublime” occurs in a question concerning the contemplative life: “Admiration is a kind of fear resulting from the apprehension of a thing that surpasses our faculties: hence it results from the contemplation of the *sublime* [*sublimis*] truth. For... contemplation terminates in the affections” (II-II 180.a3.ad3).

Although Thomas does not directly investigate the sublime as conceived by later philosophers, this one occurrence of “*sublimis*” in the *Summa* does have relevance for us. Taken in context, the “sublime truth” referred to above is God himself, the First Truth, the contemplation of which causes a kind of fear, which Thomas calls admiration. More will be said on the significance of the sublimity of God later, but let us first note the quality of the sublime given here: The sublime is a quality of truth regarding an excellence in relation to the powers of our limited human faculties. The sublime truth is a truth that excels the faculties of our intellect and thus leads to the fear that is admiration.

Having examined the one occurrence of *sublimis* in Thomas’s greatest theological work, it may seem that our investigation is over as soon as it has begun. But we can learn more from the Angelic doctor. Because the sublime is the cause of reverential fear, as recognized by both Thomas and Burke, it is through reflection upon this proper effect that we can uncover the essence of the sublime in the teaching of Thomas. Following this line of inquiry, we will first examine Thomas’s doctrine on fear in general, followed by the reverential fear given by the Holy Spirit. Thus, we might outline a Thomistic account of the sublime.

REVERENTIAL FEAR IN ST. THOMAS

According to St. Thomas, the passions of the soul all incline us towards a perceived good or away from a perceived evil. The passions can also be distinguished according to the difficulty or ease that accompanies the good or evil. Those goods that are difficult to achieve and those evils that are difficult to avoid give rise to the irascible passions: hope and despair, daring and fear, and lastly,

anger. Fear, caused by the apprehension of an impending evil that is difficult to avoid, is therefore counted among the irascible passions.

Although fear is the response to an impending evil, fear is yet born of love. In order to see this connection it is important to keep in mind the primacy of good vis-à-vis evil. Evil exists only as a privation of some good, and thus only exists in relation to this good. Fear of evil therefore presupposes the love of some good, because man fears the loss of what he loves. If it is death that is feared, then love of the good of life is presupposed. If humiliation is feared, then love of esteem or honor is presupposed.

Although fear is born of love, it is still proper to say that the object of fear is a future evil difficult to avoid, and it is this object that allows us to distinguish between diverse kinds of fear. To specify the reverential fear that is caused by the sublime, we first examine Thomas's account of the fear that arises from faith.

According to Thomas, living faith is the cause of *filial* fear, "whereby one dreads to be separated from God, or whereby one shrinks from equaling oneself to Him, and holds Him in reverence, inasmuch as faith makes us appreciate God as an unfathomable and supreme good, separation from which is the greatest evil, and to which it is wicked to wish to be equaled" (II-II 7.a1). Apprehension in faith of the Divine excellence gives rise to this reverential fear. In faith, we realize that union with this excellence is the greatest good imaginable, separation from it the greatest evil.

It may at first appear odd for fear to arise from the knowledge of Him who is Goodness itself, since fear is caused by an impending evil, not a supreme good. Thomas clarifies the cause of this fear by noting that fear may have two objects: one is the evil from which man shrinks, and the other is that from which the evil may come (II-II 19.a1).

We must be clear on this distinction: God cannot be an object of fear in the first sense, because there is no evil in God, but He can be feared in the second sense because the "evil" of punishment may come by Him, as may the "evil" of separation from him. Thomas is careful to note that punishment is essentially a good,



ALPHONSE MUCHA - HOLY MOUNT ATHOS

since it is ordered to God's justice, but relative to a particular good of this or that man it is an evil to be feared. If man fears the evil of punishment, then he is said to have servile fear, but if he fears the evil of separation from God, then he is said to have filial fear.

Thomas's distinction between the two diverse objects of fear allows us to specify the object of reverential fear caused by the sublime. Although fear may arise from "the evil from which man shrinks," this fear is not necessarily accompanied by reverence or admiration. Reverence and admiration are due to what is great and excellent, rather than what is evil and base. It follows then that the fear of the sublime must arise from the second object given by St. Thomas, namely "that from which the evil may come." This second object is not the evil inflicted, but rather the power by

which the evil comes. Thus, a sublime thing possesses a power that is excellent and may be the cause of a particular evil.

Since the sublime implies an excellence of power, the degree of sublimity corresponds with the degree of a power's excellence. The primary distinction to be made concerning the excellence of power lies in the distinction between a power that is personal or one that is impersonal. An impersonal power belongs to any non-rational being with the power to act in accord with its nature. Such an impersonal power can excel our own in a way, because it can be opposed to our will and surpass our own limited powers to resist its violence.

This impersonal power – say, a lion or a hurricane – may be astonishing and admirable for the simple fact that it excels our own powers of resistance, thus garnering respectful attention as that which may harm us. A perilous cliff may set our imagination reeling as to our limited powers to secure our own safety, and thus we are brought to the point of admiration and astonishment. The love that corresponds to this fear is the love of our own selves, the desire for self-preservation.

But the case is slightly different in art and architecture. Whereas the tremendous forces of nature are aptly called sublime, the sublimity of monumental constructions, such as the towering stone vaults of a gothic cathedral, arises from consideration of the power that must have been their cause. The power to create such magnificent structures excels that of any single man, and in that way a certain fear of admiration arises.

Still another fear can be identified, which pertains to the intellectual faculty of man. As Thomas's one use of *sublimis* shows us, the fear of admiration results from the contemplation of a *sublime truth* that excels the faculties of man. Thus, when man encounters a mystery that is beyond the finite powers of his intellect, he is filled with a reverential fear. The overwhelming significance of any great truth, at first dimly conceived, can have this effect. An important truth undisclosed by the one with the power to disclose (and thus the one with such excellent power) is

the source of reverential fear, and all the more so when the truth is one of self-disclosure.

Man's highest faculties are the intellect and will, for it is through the intellect that man becomes united with that which he knows, and it is through the will that man goes out to the good which he loves in an ecstatic movement of the soul. Because sublimity implies a comparison of the excellence of a being's power vis-à-vis man, the sublime is most properly said of personal beings that possess powers of intellect and will surpassing that of man.

An exalted truth and an impressive created good may, in a manner of speaking, be called sublime insofar as they come from an intellect and will. But that is most properly sublime which possesses these personal powers in itself. Thus, it is unsurprising that we personify the forces of nature when attempting to express their sublimity, and are often led to praise the Creator who wrought them by the power of his wisdom and providential will.

Seeing that the sublime is an excellence of power said properly of persons, we find the prime analogue and perfection of sublimity in the personal God, and the fear that responds most perfectly to this sublimity in the filial fear given by the Holy Spirit. Filial fear is a reverential fear that recoils from the evil of separation from God, a separation that results from, among other things, making oneself equal to God by neglecting to pay the reverence and honor due to the divine excellence.

Paying this debt of reverence is necessary to avoid separation, since "by rendering a person his due, one becomes suitably proportioned to him, through being ordered to him in a becoming manner" (ST II-II q.81 a.2). Man is ordered to God not as to an equal, but as to one who infinitely surpasses his lowly nature, and thus the only suitable proportion of man to God is one of total subjection through reverence. As Thomas teaches, "by the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind is subjected to Him; wherein its perfection consists, since a thing is perfected by being subjected to its superior..." (II-II q.81 a.7).

To summarize then, according to St. Thomas reverence follows from the fear of the evil of being unduly proportioned to (and thus separated from) the excellence of another. The love which is presupposed by this fear is the love of the good of union with an excellent beloved, through due proportion to the beloved. This due proportion is achieved through reverent submission by which the one who reveres affirms the beloved's excellence, wishing it to be given free reign, and participating in the excellence of the other by being subjected to it in love. Reverential fear then recoils from the evil of setting oneself against this excellence, which would cut one off from union with the beloved.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the sublime is an excellence of power, which is said most properly of the highest powers of the highest nature. These highest powers include intellect and will, and thus sublimity is most properly said of a personal being, namely God, who, as universal cause of all powers proper to created natures, is supremely sublime and the exemplar of all sublimity. In faith, man encounters the God who alone is infinitely powerful, infinitely good, and infinitely intelligible. All created powers fall within his providence, and thus all sublimity is ultimately attributable to Him. Majestic mountains, terrific thunderstorms, and coruscating cathedrals all participate in the terrifying beauty and perfect sublimity of the God who sustains all creatures in being.

An encounter with the most sublime God has the power to release man from the boredom of pride and to captivate him with the admiration, reverence, and awe that God's sublimity demands. Filial fear can destroy the pride at the heart of modernity's boredom so that, in humble submission, man's gaze can rise to regard Him who infinitely excels his created nature. In living faith, he will contemplate the God of Love, and boredom will give way to praise as he joins the psalmist's song:

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly powers,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
bow down before the LORD, majestic in holiness.

The voice of the LORD upon the waters,
the God of glory thunders;
the LORD on the immensity of waters;
the voice of the LORD full of power;
the voice of the LORD full of splendor...

...In his temple they all cry, "Glory!" (Psalm 29).

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