

Sublime Aesthetics and Politics in Kant's “General Remark”

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the much-debated treatment of enthusiasm in Kant's “General Remark” of the Critique of the Power of Judgment. It focuses on the dual reference to the concept and seeks to trace both the continuities and discontinuities between these two treatments, as well as between them and the preceding analysis of the sublime, divided into the mathematically and dynamically sublime. Furthermore, it is argued that the concept of enthusiasm serves as a bridge between the aesthetic and the socio-political realms, revealing how aesthetics, morality, and politics converge within Kant's critical philosophy and especially within Kant's analysis of the sublime.

1. Introduction

In Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment, at the end of Kant's “Analytic of the Sublime” and appended to the chapter on the “Modality of the Sublime” (§29), there appears a dense and somewhat puzzling section entitled “General Remark on the Exposition of the Aesthetic Reflective Judgements” (Kant 2000, 5:264–276).² In this chapter, Kant offers a recapitulation of the relationship between the beautiful and the sublime, particularly with regard to how each relates to and promotes moral principles. This discussion culminates in an aesthetic

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² Instead of citing the page numbers of the translated text, I refer to the standard volume and paragraph numbering of the German Academy Edition (*Akademie-Ausgabe*) of Kant's works, since it is retained in Guyer's English edition. Where no translation is required, references are made directly to the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (AK).

characterization of moral goodness, which Kant aligns with the sublime rather than the beautiful. This association becomes the central focus of the remainder of the chapter, where Kant seeks to reconcile the sublime with certain affects. Among these, his chief concern is enthusiasm, which he defines as “the idea of the good with affect” (Kant 2000, 5:272). This forms our main concern.

The difficulty with this relatively marginal analysis of the sublime is that it does not sit comfortably within Kant’s prior transcendental framework, nor with the established division between the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. With the introduction of affects, the focus shifts away from natural phenomena that are fit to generate ideas of infinity and power – the proper objects of the mathematically and dynamically sublime – toward certain mental states, thereby obliging us to move in our enquiry from exterior to interior nature. To account for this shift, scholars have proposed a range of interpretations. Crowther (1989) suggests that what Kant offers in this context is in fact a subdivision of the dynamically sublime; Clewis (2009) introduces a distinct category of the sublime called the “moral sublime”; and Doran (2015) argues for a hybrid form, blending moral and aesthetic judgment.

In this context, my aim is twofold: first, to propose an alternative interpretation centered on the concept of enthusiasm, which appears twice in the text under examination and serves as the structural basis of my analysis; and second, to highlight the political narrative that unfolds in parallel with the aesthetic discourse in Kant’s “General Remark” – a narrative facilitated by the turn to the interior nature.

2. Aesthetic and practical Enthusiasm

As already noted, in its first occurrence, enthusiasm is described by Kant as “the idea of the good with affect” (Kant 2000, 5:272), thereby opening a broader discussion of affects and which of them – and under what conditions – may be considered sublime.

Let us here note that the concept of enthusiasm preoccupied Kant already in his pre-critical writings. Thus, when, in the passage under discussion, Kant observes that “without it nothing great can be accomplished” (Kant 2000 5:272), he is not merely registering, in a manner

reminiscent of the Aristotelian practice,³ a widely shared conviction of his time, in order then to distance himself from it; he is, in fact, returning – verbatim – to claims he had himself advanced in his early work. In the *Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, for example, Kant remarks of enthusiasm that “nothing great has ever been accomplished in the world without it” (Kant 2011, 2:267). Likewise, in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant distinguishes enthusiasm from fanaticism (Schwärmerei) and associates it with patriotism, religion, and friendship (Kant 2011, 2:251, footnote q). Were we to attempt a kind of personification of the concept at this early stage, we could link it with the emblematic figure of Cato the Younger, who committed suicide upon hearing of the fall of the Roman Republic – a figure explicitly mentioned by Kant twice in his early works.⁴

In these pre-critical writings, a certain ambiguity regarding enthusiasm is already apparent. On the one hand, it is portrayed as the source of heroic deeds; on the other, it appears to contain an element of exaggeration: “All great undertakings are accomplished by those in a state of enthusiasm. Take Cato, for instance —in dying he may have gone too far” (AK 27:40). While rooted in noble moral principles, such as patriotism, enthusiasm reveals itself as a morally precarious disposition, prone to producing ethically dubious outcomes, as exemplified by Cato’s suicide.⁵ In the third *Critique*, Kant is more emphatic and stricter. Enthusiasm is not only an exaggeration; it is considered “blind, either in the selection of its purpose, or, if that were to have been given by reason, in [the manner of] achieving it” (Kant 2000 2: 271) and, for this reason, it can in no way receive the approval of Reason. “Nevertheless”, Kant observes, “from an aesthetic point of view, enthusiasm is sublime” and this “because it is an intensification of human powers through ideas, which imparts to the mind an elevation that acts far more powerfully and enduringly than impulses derived from sensible representations” (Kant 2000, 2: 271). This formulation, which expands the way Kant sees and thematizes the concept of enthusiasm, giving it thus a place within the mature transcendental framework of the *Critique of Judgment*, is admittedly a dense one and requires interpretation, particularly regarding the reference to an “aesthetic point of view,” which has sparked considerable discussion and the various interpretations to which we have already briefly referred.

³ See *Topics* I.1, 100b21–23 and *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.1, 1145b2–7.

⁴ See AK 20:4.

⁵ On Kant’s use of the concept of enthusiasm in the pre-critical and critical work, see Clewis 2009.

Let us start from this: enthusiasm, as treated in the third *Critique*, seems to be accessible from both a practical and an aesthetic point of view. The practical perspective, which dominates in the early work of Kant, defines enthusiasm in terms of action. It functions in this case more like a motive; a driving impulse, and indeed a quite potent one, since it allows man to surpass his usual powers. The reference to the “aesthetic point of view,” on the other hand, can be defined, antithetically to practical enthusiasm, as a certain detachment from action; an approach that does not consider enthusiasm in terms of outcomes, whether moral or practical; it involves a reflective focus on how our affectivity is structured: an intense emotion then which, however, is orientated toward a perceived good and inspires a sense of autonomy. In this context, then, the aesthetic standpoint removes us from tangible purposes, but does bring forward what, in the third *Critique*, Kant calls subjective purposiveness: that special purposiveness associated with the sublime, of course, and consisting in the awareness of a higher vocation for humanity. And it is a subjective purposiveness because we don’t recognize it intellectually but experience it as enthusiasm. From the “aesthetic point of view,” then, enthusiasm concerns the awareness of a moral capacity, whereas from the practical standpoint the question would be whether, and by what means, we actualize this capacity. In this context, Clewis is, I believe, right in considering enthusiasm as a form of the feeling of the sublime, with its object being the moral law in its different manifestations (Clewis 2009, 183-194).

Kant, however, attributes sublimity to enthusiasm, not to the moral law itself. Thus, a strict, literal reading of the text would rather suggest that it is the sight of human beings in a state of enthusiasm that is sublime; in other words, that it is “practical enthusiasm” which, from an aesthetic perspective (from the spectator’s standpoint), appears sublime. Indeed, a certain reading of the essay “An old question raised again: Is the human race constantly progressing toward the better?” could justify such an interpretation.⁶ Furthermore, in the passage under

⁶ Within the framework of such an interpretation, the notion of sympathy, as it appears in the *Essay* concerning human progress, would be crucial for understanding the function of “aesthetic enthusiasm.” Based on this, we could think of the “aesthetic enthusiasm” in the “General Remark” as operating roughly as follows: just as in the case of the “dynamically sublime,” where we imagine ourselves facing an irresistible force (under the condition of safety), so too in this case we imaginatively place ourselves in the position of the agents who are seized by enthusiasm. This imaginative transposition allows us to experience the “spiritual magnitude” they feel, yet without any inclination toward involvement. Thus, this potentiality—which does not become actualized in the case of the spectators—leads to the dynamic expansion of the imagination that characterizes the feeling of the sublime. We feel the sense of power that motivates them in view of an idea, without ourselves needing to act, and therefore without resorting to their immoral and possibly criminal means. In a way, their enthusiasm becomes our own —perhaps somewhat weakened—which might also explain Kant’s hesitation to speak of the enthusiasm of the spectators.

discussion, Kant characterizes other affects (as well as apathy) as sublime in themselves (Ak. 5:273), a reference which supports such a reading, which would subvert ours. Nevertheless, in the second reference to the concept Kant clearly conceives enthusiasm as the feeling occasioned by a sublime object —namely, God. I shall return to this at greater length in the following section; for the moment, however, I maintain that if the two references are indeed continuous with one another (as I firmly believe), then it is unlikely that Kant understood enthusiasm differently in each case.

The question that arises next is which kind of sublime we are talking about, the dynamically sublime, the mathematically sublime, or some new kind, as has often been argued? The whole context, relating to action and the division between practical and aesthetic enthusiasm and the reference to the “intensification of human powers” (Kant 2000, 2: 271) in the initial quotation – and if we wish to remain within Kant’s established categories, without needing to invent a new one – make it, I believe, more probable that we are dealing with the dynamically sublime. To this also testifies the reference found a few lines later: “Every affect of the vigorous kind (i.e., which makes us conscious that we have forces to overcome any resistance, i.e., makes us conscious of our *animus strenuus*)”, Kant writes, “is *aesthetically sublime*” (Kant 2000, 5:272). My view on this point, therefore, aligns rather with that of Crowther. We no longer have a terrifying natural phenomenon before our imagination, but an *idea*, which nonetheless generates within the soul a sense of the invincible.

At this point, I would like to introduce a brief digression, which can help to clarify both what Kant precisely means by enthusiasm and why he chooses to conclude his overall analysis of the sublime with this “ambiguous” mental state. The text I wish to turn to is the previously mentioned essay *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing Toward the Better?* In this essay, first published in 1798, Kant once again engages with the notion of enthusiasm, articulating it in a way that, in many respects, recalls the discussion presented in the “General Remark.” Overall, in the essay, Kant seeks the event that would attest to the moral progress of humanity and finds it in the French Revolution; not in itself, but in the universal and disinterested solidarity of the spectators with the revolutionaries.

The enthusiasm to which Kant primarily refers, in this text – and, as already mentioned, in almost identical terms to those of the *Critique of Judgment* – is the enthusiasm of the French

revolutionaries,⁷ which, in a way, replace Cato as the representative *par excellence* of the concept. He refers to their “passionate participation in the good” and “to the zeal and grandeur of soul which the pure concept of right produced in them” (Kant 1797, 155). This made them invincible compared to those in the opposing camp, who fought on the basis of self-interest or the old principle of honor; a principle that Kant regards as analogous to enthusiasm, a rather outdated and, I would say, inauthentic form of enthusiasm, since “genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral” (Kant 1797, 155). Still, beyond the strong and obvious analogies between the two texts, there is something, I believe, that reinforces the political reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and that emerges in the context of the second reference to enthusiasm, to which I now turn.

3. Negative Representation

In moving to the second reference to the concept of enthusiasm, Kant’s point of view seems to shift considerably. From his earlier engagement with the “dynamically sublime” – those mental states involved in a kind of resistance to sensibility – Kant now turns to an argument that concerns the notion of the infinite and thus seems to return to the “mathematically sublime.” The concept that dominates here, and would go on to exert a significant influence on later thought about the sublime, is that of “negative presentation.”⁸ In any case, what holds Kant’s treatment together and connects the two references to enthusiasm is, on the one hand, the persistent concern with the aesthetic determination of the moral law, and on the other, the fact that the sublime is no longer related to nature, but is explored in its socio-political dimension, with religion occupying an even more prominent position in this section.

The guiding question at this point is the following: does the excessively abstract mode of representing moral law weaken the feeling that accompanies and characterizes the sublime? Kant’s answer is a negative one. On the contrary, abstraction expands the imagination and

⁷ The notion of enthusiasm is also attributed to the spectators of the Revolution; this however is done with great hesitation. Kant first speaks of a “disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other” (Kant 1797, 153), and a few lines later refers to “a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm” (ibid). When he returns to the spectators’ attitude, he speaks of an “exaltation” with which “the uninvolved public looking on sympathized without the least in tension of assisting” (157). Thus, there is only a single reference to enthusiasm —and even that, to something merely approaching it.

⁸ See, for example, the way Lyotard reconstructs the relevant chapter in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (Lyotard 1994, 147–158).

thereby intensifies the feeling of the sublime. As he notes: “It is a wholly groundless fear to suppose that if one removes from the representation everything that can commend it to the senses, nothing would remain but a cold, lifeless assent” (Kant 2000, 5:275). This statement is the key to connecting the sublime with the good from the very beginning of the chapter we are dealing with. The problem Kant addresses here would indeed arise in the case of the beautiful, which depends upon sensible presentation and is nourished by the forms of objects. The sublime, by contrast – especially the *mathematically sublime* – derives its force precisely from the formless, from that which gives the impression of infinity or is actually infinite, from what cannot be bounded by space or enclosed within any coherent representation. Hence comes Kant’s introduction of the notion of a “negative presentation” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

To grasp the peculiar pleasure we derive from the abstract, we must recall that the sublime is marked by a mixture of pain and pleasure, repulsion and attraction – what Kant calls “negative pleasure” (Kant 2000, 5:245). The intensity of the sublime arises precisely from this connection with the pain of self-frustration, brought about by the imagination’s incapacity to perform its task. For this very incapacity discloses a higher vocation that cannot be realized, but whose pursuit is experienced as expansion. “That deprivation”, Kant writes, “is therefore a presentation of the infinite, which indeed can never be more than a negative presentation, but which nonetheless expands the soul” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

In this way, Kant seems to return to his original account of the sublime —namely, the *mathematically sublime*, occasioned by absolute greatness. Yet the difference is decisive: the stimulus here is not some vast natural object but rather an Idea of reason. The similarity is that in both cases the imagination is confronted with the unrepresentable. The contrast, on the other hand, is that in the case of natural objects we face an illusion of infinity grounded in the limits of human mental capacities, whereas in the case of the moral law we encounter a genuinely abstract infinitude. In both cases, however, the sublimity concerns the subject and the higher vocation indicated for it by reason.

It is in the attempt to establish this position regarding the intense emotional response to an abstract representation that the concept of enthusiasm reappears, seemingly for the sake of clarification. It returns through a reference to the *Old Testament* and the prohibition of images found there. “There is,” Kant argues, “no more sublime passage in the legislation of the Jews than the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor any likeness...’

Only this commandment can explain the enthusiasm the Jewish people felt for their religion.” Unlike the first reference to the concept, enthusiasm now has an explicitly defined object. That object is religion and, more precisely, a particular kind of religion: the one that prohibits the depiction of God. This is why Kant refers not only to the Jews, but also to the Muslims. Moreover, what is also clear in this case – thus confirming the earlier interpretation – is that enthusiasm is indeed treated as the subjective feeling of the sublime.

Let us unpack Kant’s reasoning. By forbidding images, the specific commandment leaves the imagination without “nourishment.” Yet, in doing so, it brings to the fore Reason and the idea of God as an absolute being – a being beyond all spatial, temporal, or causal limitation – whom we can think as such, though not represent. Thus, the imagination is first frustrated, but at the same time pushed to transcend its limits, striving in vain to form an image of the unrepresentable idea of God. Enthusiasm, in this context, concerns the suspension of the limits of the senses and the release of the imagination, which seeks to elevate itself to the level of Reason, thereby discovering – as in the case of the mathematical and dynamical sublime – a higher vocation for man. In this way, the process of subreption⁹ is once again at work. We may call religion or God sublime, but in fact, the sublimity lies in the subjective tendency of the human being to transcend the limits of their sensible nature. Let us stress here that this paradigm is meant to cherish the sublimity of moral law, with its abstract, not representable, character, and not of any particular religion. He makes this obvious immediately after the example concerning religion, as he returns to his initial focus. He writes: “The very same thing also holds of the representation of the moral law and the predisposition to morality in us.” (Kant 2000, 5: 274).

What follows is a politically charged critique of the way institutionalized religions have been instrumentalized by governments to maintain social conformity and passive obedience. Referring to religious imagery, Kant writes “That is why even governments have gladly allowed religion to be richly equipped with such supplements and thus sought to relieve the subject of the bother but at the same time also of the capacity to extend the powers of his soul beyond the limits that are arbitrarily set for him and by means of which, as merely passive, he can more

⁹ See the way Kant introduces the term: “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” (5:257).

easily be dealt with.” (Kant 2000, 5:274-275). Although Kant does not name specific historical cases, the quoted reference most probably points to Catholicism with its reliance on visual religious representations (paintings, sculptures) and its institutionalized political power.¹⁰ From this passage, furthermore, Doran (2015, 271) infers a revolutionary spirit in Kant’s reflections, emphasizing the ideal of citizens’ autonomy. Yet, in the same text Kant also warns of the need “to moderate the momentum of an unbounded imagination” (Kant 2000, 5:274), a remark that recalls once again the ambivalence of enthusiasm and Kant’s complex attitude toward the French Revolution (admiring its ends while condemning its means) which would, of course, later (in the essay on the progress of humanity to which we referred in the first part) take an explicit form.¹¹

It is in this sociopolitical context that, I think, we must place the distinction that Kant draws next between enthusiasm and visionary rapture (*Schwärmerei*). This distinction already appears in his pre-critical writings¹² and re-emerges in the *Third Critique* through the notion of the “negative representation.” Kant observes that “This pure, elevating, merely negative presentation of morality, by contrast, carries with it no risk of visionary rapture, which is a delusion of being able to *see* something beyond all bounds of sensibility” (Kant 2000, 5:275). The concept of a “visionary rupture” refers primarily to the classical Greek use of the term “enthusiasm” (*enthousiasmos*), that is, to the idea of a divine inspiration granting ecstatic priestesses and seers the ability to foresee the future. Within the same historical framework, the notion could also, in the form of inspiration, serve as a source of artistic creativity.¹³ Indeed, Doran (2015, 273) connects Kant’s discussion to the *Sturm und Drang* movement, referring to Herder and Hamann. However, the paragraph in which Kant elaborates this distinction immediately follows the one on religion, and the sense in which he employs the term in this context points more to its religious than artistic dimension. More specifically, Kant is alluding to a phenomenon well known in his time – one that arose chiefly during the religious upheavals in Europe resulting from the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. The phenomenon concerned certain individuals, often members of religious sects, who claimed to experience inner visions and revelations, thereby asserting a special connection with the divine.

¹⁰ There are of course moderate forms of Protestantism, as Anglicanism, which maintained an established, state-linked, and episcopal (bishop-led) framework and even tolerated a moderate use of images.

¹¹ In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant observed that the revolution «may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a right-thinking human being, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully the second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such cost” (Kant 1999, 7:85).

¹² Kant 2011, 57, footnote q.

¹³ See Plato’s *Ion*.

Writing within such a context, Kant thus refers to the opposite phenomenon from that which had previously occupied him, and I believe that what he has in mind now is a form of radical Protestantism, and again, the political implications of this kind of credo. What is at issue is no longer the passivity engendered by a particular form of religion and its political instrumentalization, but rather an arrogant exaltation of thought – that kind of “delusion of being able to *see* something beyond all bounds of sensibility” (Kant 2000, 5:275). What leads to this arrogance is a liberation from all rules and constraints, motivated by the desire to see further than one can when bound by law. In contrast to visionary rupture, which is a passion involving an imagination without rules, enthusiasm is an affect, pertaining to an imagination temporarily freed from rules. Enthusiasm is sublime, for it reveals the moral capacities of human beings; visionary rupture, by contrast, can never be sublime; it is not merely “profoundly ridiculous,” but a “disease that dismembers” (Kant 2000, 5:275).

The connection I have suggested between the French Revolution and radical Protestantism is not a direct one, yet there are significant ideological, philosophical, and social affinities between these two forms of religious and social radicalism, especially regarding their conceptions of authority, equality, and individual freedom.¹⁴ In his essay “*What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*” Kant acknowledges the political implications of radical Protestantism —namely, that the “enlightened” rapidly attract followers, and that along with these followers come political ambitions. “First *genius* is very pleased with its bold flights, since it has cast off the thread by which reason used to steer it. Soon it enchants others with its triumphant pronouncements and great expectations and now seems to have set itself on a throne which was so badly graced by slow and ponderous reason, whose language, however, it always employs” (Kant 1999, 8:145).

Finally, let us highlight the fact that, following his brief comment on the “mathematically sublime,” Kant seems to return to the “dynamically sublime,” a move that attests to the unity of the two distinct aspects of the Kantian conception of the sublime.

¹⁴ See, in this regard Walzer 1965. Examining the religious revolutions of Calvinism, Puritanism, and other radical movements, Walzer shows how the religious reformers created the cultural and moral paradigms that were later employed in revolutions such as the French. As for Germany, more specifically, the German Peasants’ War (1524–1525) constitutes a characteristic example of the way in which theological demands were transformed into demands for social justice and economic redistribution, making use of the rhetoric of the Reformation. For a historical account of the German Peasants’ War, see Lyndal Roper, *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants’ War*, Basic Books, London 2025.

4. Conclusions

In summary, I have argued the following. First, the two references to the concept of enthusiasm, although they initially approach it from different angles and link it to different human faculties (cognitive and desiderative), nonetheless belong to the same discussion – namely, the aesthetic evaluation of the good – and should indeed be considered together. Second, we are not dealing with a special, much less inferior, category of the sublime, assumption that would fragment the coherent notion of the sublime which Kant understands as unified and as pertaining to the bridging of freedom and nature, whether external or internal; from an aesthetic point of view, moral law is situated within the transcendental distinction between the mathematical and dynamic disposition of the imagination, processing, moreover, the capacity to move on both levels – cognitive and desiderative; that is, it can be judged sublime either from a mathematical or a dynamic perspective. Third, behind Kant's concern with enthusiasm lies not merely a turn toward culture, but a specific political interest and an underlying reflection on the French Revolution and thus Kant's ambivalence toward enthusiasm appears to mirror his ambivalence toward the French Revolution: an endorsement of its ends, yet a condemnation of its means.

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