

LE SUBLIME EST-IL UNE PROPRIÉTÉ ESTHÉTIQUE?

On Aesthetic Properties

Collège de France, 6-7 octobre 2022

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QUAERE,

1. Do aesthetic properties play a central role in the characterization of aesthetic experiences?
2. More specifically, does the property of being sublime, construed as an aesthetic property, play a central role in the characterization of experiences of the sublime?

AESTHETIC PROPERTIES

- Aesthetic properties are what aesthetic judgments are about.
- Aesthetic judgments are evaluative and represent something as possessing aesthetic merit or demerit (Urmson, 1957).
- Aesthetic properties include being beautiful and being sublime, but also being elegant, balanced, harmonious, flamboyant, or ugly, clumsy, garish, grotesque, *inter alia*.

EDMUND BURKE (1757)

- “For sublime objects are **vast** in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively **small**; beauty should be **smooth**, and **polished**; the great, **rugged** and **negligent**; [...] beauty **should not be obscure**; the great ought to be **dark** and **gloomy**; beauty should be **light** and **delicate**; the great ought to be **solid**, and even **massive**.” (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Section XXVII)

IMMANUEL KANT (1764)

- “The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peak rises above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or Milton’s portrayal of the infernal kingdom, arouse enjoyment but with horror; on the other hand, the sight of flower strewn meadows, valleys with winding brooks and covered with grazing flocks, the description of Elysium, or Homer’s portrayal of the girdle of Venus, also occasion a pleasant sensation but one that is joyous and smiling. In order that the former impression could occur to us in due strength, we must have a feeling of the sublime, and, in order to enjoy the latter well, a feeling of the beautiful.” (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*)

THE SCOPE OF THE SUBLIME

NATURAL SCENARIOS



HUMAN CREATIONS



PLAN

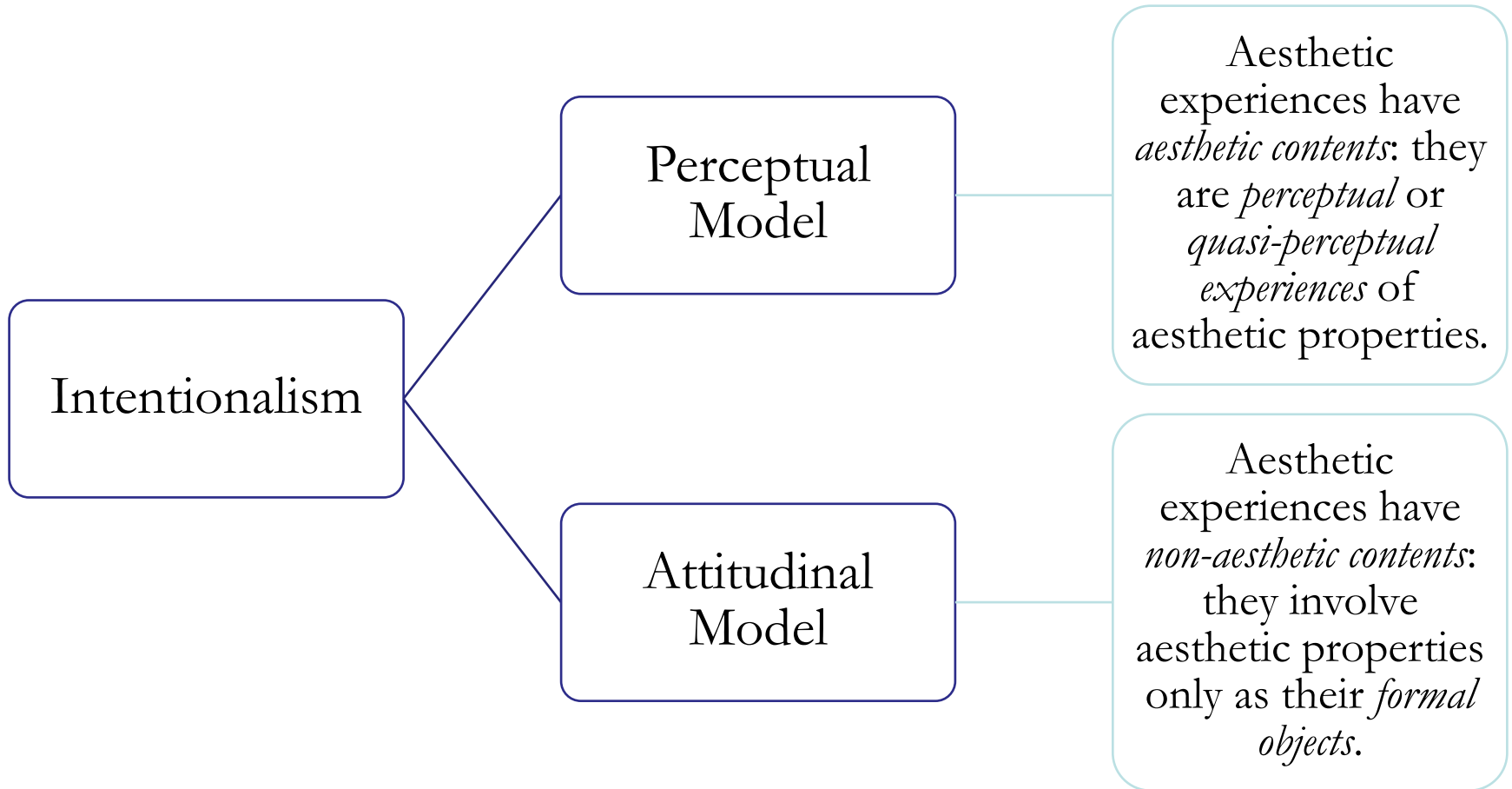
- I. Intentionalism *vs* Adverbialism
- II. The anatomy of the sublime
- III. Against Intentionalism about the sublime
- IV. Conclusions: What about beauty?

I. INTENTIONALISM VS ADVERBIALISM

INTENTIONALISM

- The traditional view is that aesthetic experiences, just like aesthetic judgments, are *about* or *(re)present* aesthetic properties.
- Aesthetic properties are the *intentional objects* of aesthetic experiences.
 - When a particular painting strikes me as beautiful, I have an aesthetic experience that presents the painting as beautiful.

TWO VERSIONS OF INTENTIONALISM



CORRECTNESS CONDITIONS

- Intentionalism (in both versions) entails that aesthetic properties figure in the (intrinsic) *correctness conditions* of aesthetic experiences.
- Aesthetic experiences are correct *only if* some aesthetic properties are instantiated.
 - For instance, my aesthetic experience of a beautiful painting is correct only if the painting *is* beautiful.

SENSE AND SENTIMENTALITY

- Some of us may judge that Paul Peel's *The Young Biologist* (1891) is a sentimental picture.
- Dominic Lopes argues that such a judgment can be based on “perceptual or quasi-perceptual” aesthetic experience (2005, p. 108).
- On his view, we can *see* the painting as possessing (aesthetic) demerit.



WONDER

- Other versions of Intentionalism construe aesthetic experiences as *emotions* intentionally directed at aesthetic properties.
- For instance, Fingerhut & Prinz (2018) argue that *wonder* is the best emotion capturing aesthetic goodness.
- Wonder might then be viewed either as a quasi-perceptual experience of some aesthetic property, such as beauty, or as an aesthetic attitude whose formal object is beauty.

ADVERBIALISM I/II

- Intentionalism about aesthetic experiences stands opposed to Adverbialism.
- Adverbialism is the view that aesthetic experiences are not *sui generis* psychological attitudes, but *ways* or *manners* of combining attitudes neither of which is an experience of aesthetic properties.
- N.B. Adverbialism is congenial to present-day accounts of “the aesthetic stance”, such as Schaeffer (2015)’s.

ADVERBIALISM II/II

- Adverbialism entails that aesthetic experiences do not have aesthetic properties as intentional objects.
- On this view, aesthetic experiences either do not have correctness conditions or have correctness conditions that do not involve aesthetic properties.
- Aesthetic experiences are not correct or incorrect depending on whether certain aesthetic properties are instantiated.

AGENDA

- ✓ Experiences of the sublime are best accounted for in adverbialist terms.
- ✓ They are ways of combining attitudes neither of which involves experiencing the sublime or any other aesthetic property.
- ✓ They are not intentionally about the property of being sublime.
 - When a natural scene or a huge construction strikes me as sublime, I do not have an aesthetic experience that presents the scene or the construction as sublime.

II. THE ANATOMY OF THE SUBLIME

THE BEAUTIFUL VS THE SUBLIME

- “[The feeling of the sublime] can be occasioned [...] when **perceptually overwhelming properties** of objects **test and strain our perceptual faculties.**” (Crowther, 1989, p. 8)
- “The beautiful is associated with the form of an object, which involves qualities that are contained or bounded in some way, while the sublime, in its **overwhelming magnitude or power**, is associated with formlessness and limitlessness.” (Brady, 2013, p. 56)

COGNITIVE LIMITS

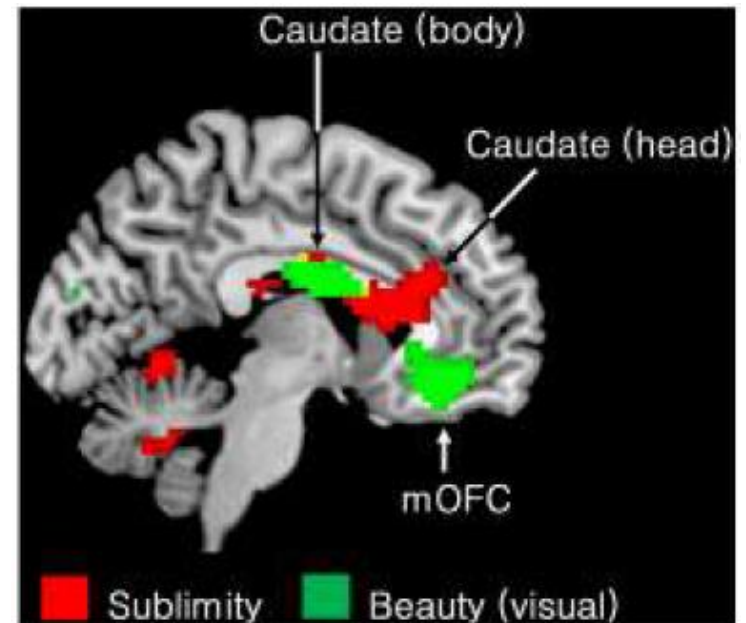
- The sublime does not overwhelm just perception, but also imagination, and more generally the mind:
 - “Our Imagination loves **to be filled with an Object**, or to grasp at any thing that is **too big** for its Capacity.” (Addison 1712)
 - “Infinity has a tendency **to fill the mind.**” (Burke, 1759)
- When a magnitude or power overwhelms us, we have a radical *limit-experience*: we feel that we have reached the limits of our best cognitive capacities to deal with the world.

NEGATIVE VALENCE

- Limit-experiences have a *negative valence*: they “feel bad”, sometimes terribly so.
- They may involve the feeling that we are too small or not powered or gifted enough to deal with the world.
- Radical limit-experiences involve in addition the *feeling of self-negation* (Cochrane, 2012): it seems to us that we cannot find comfort in *any* other cognitive competence that would allow us to deal with the world.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SELF

- Neurophysiological studies suggest that the experience of the sublime, *unlike that of the beautiful*, involves an under-activation of brain regions related to self-reference, indicating “a suppression of self-awareness” (Ishizu & Zeki, 2014, p. 9).



ASSIMILATION VS ACCOMMODATION

- Affective experiences with a negative valence motivate the subject to find a way out, such as running away in the case of fear.
- Radical limit-experiences motivate the subject to diminish or remove subjective uncertainty, but what can and should be done is itself uncertain.
- They call for *accommodation*, which is “the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience” (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 304).

KELTNER & HAIDT (2003)

TABLE 1
A prototype approach to awe and related states

<i>Eliciting situations</i>	<i>Central features</i>		<i>Peripheral or “flavouring” features</i>				
	<i>Vastness</i>	<i>Accom.</i>	<i>Threat</i>	<i>Beauty</i>	<i>Ability</i>	<i>Virtue</i>	<i>Supernatural</i>
Social elicitors							
1. Prototype: Powerful leader	X	X	?				
2. Encounter with God	X	X	?	?		X	X
3. Great skill (Admiration ^a)		X			X		
4. Great virtue (Elevation ^a)		X				X	
Physical elicitors							
5. Tornado	X	X	X	?			?
6. Grand vista	X	X		X			
7. Cathedral	X	X		X	X		?
8. Awe-inspiring music	X	X		X	X		
9. A beautiful painting (Aesthetic pleasure ^a)				X	?		
Cognitive elicitors							
10. Grand theory	X	X		?			
11. Seeing an object levitate (Uncanny ^a)		X	?				X

X Denotes that the appraisal is usually made in this case.

? Denotes that the appraisal is sometimes made in this case (and if it is made, it adds a flavour).

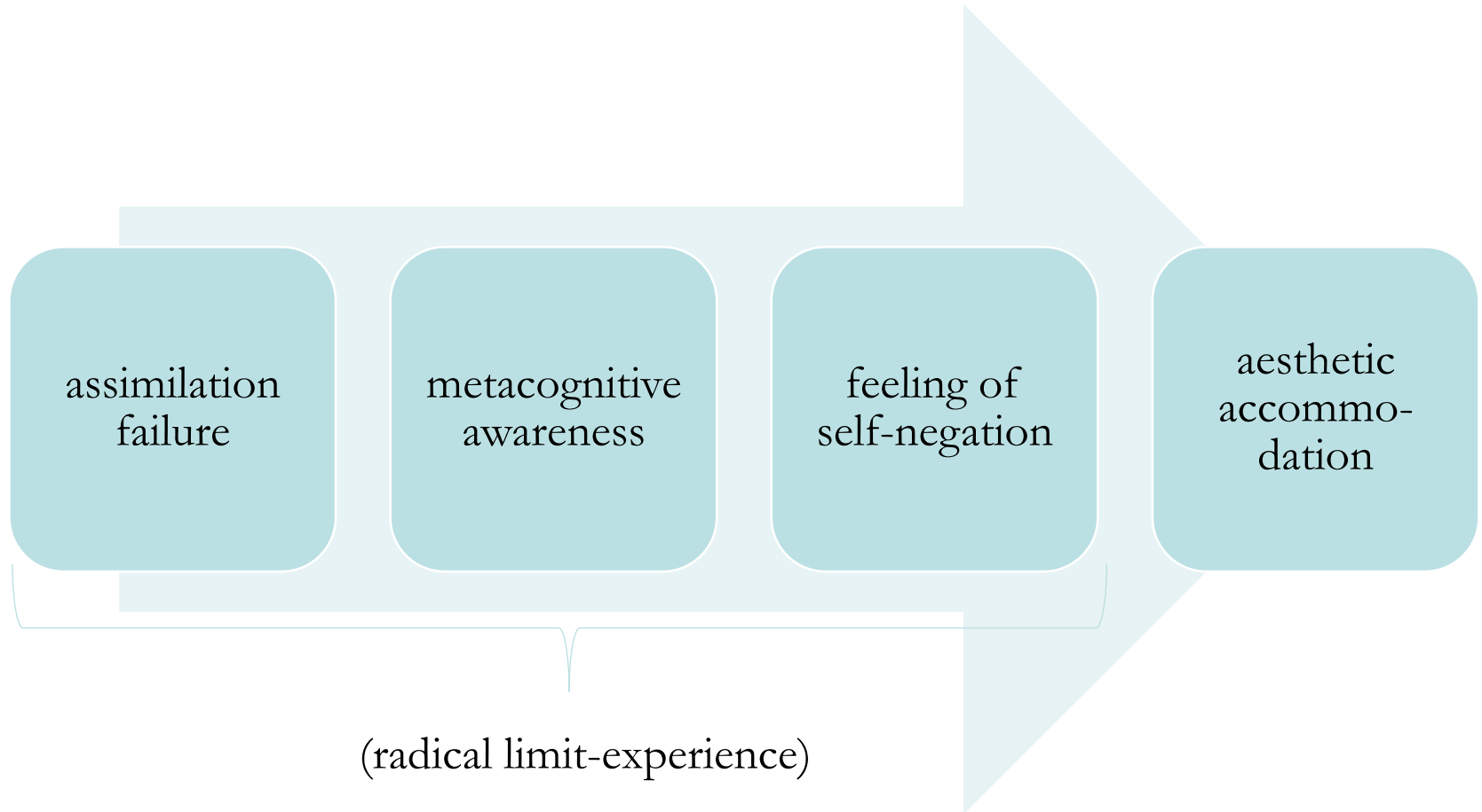
^a Denotes states that are related to awe, but should not be labelled as awe.

sublime objects

AESTHETIC ACCOMMODATION

- The experience of the sublime involves a specific, *aesthetic* way of accommodating radical limit-experiences.
- Aesthetic accommodation brings in novel or extraordinary cognitive resources to simultaneously:
 1. Restore the subject's place in front of the sublime.
 2. Represent the sublime as an object.

THE DYNAMICS OF THE SUBLIME



[From Arcangeli & Dokic (2020)]

THE REVENGE OF THE IMAGINATION

- Even if our imagination is initially overwhelmed by the sublime, it can also play a *positive* role, helping accommodation.
- Accommodation is a creative process and engages imagination (perhaps in its “creative” as opposed to “re-creative” form; Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002).
- Representing the sublime as an object requires great imaginative effort.

EMPATHY FOR THE SUBLIME

- “I suggest that our capacity to admire sublime objects, and to sincerely value their greatness for their own sake is due to a direct psychological transmission of sublime qualities that does not rely on any sense of ‘earning’ those qualities or otherwise physically interacting with the sublime environment. On this model we imaginatively identify with the properties of the sublime object.” (Cochrane, 2012, p. 140)

III. AGAINST INTENTIONALISM ABOUT THE SUBLIME

ADVERBIALISM AND THE SUBLIME

- The experience of the sublime is essentially *composite*, and neither of its components is an experience of the object as sublime.
- Aesthetic accommodation restores the duality of the subject's experience and makes aesthetic evaluation possible again, but it is not itself directed at aesthetic properties.

RECALCITRANCE

- Perceptual experiences can be *recalcitrant*, i.e., resist our best judgments: statements like “This looks blue, but it is not” are perfectly acceptable.
- In contrast, the experience of the sublime can hardly be recalcitrant: a statement like “This seems sublime, but it is not” has an air of Moorean paradox.
- The explanation is that the experience of the sublime *moves the whole of us*, including our judging self.

REALITY VS APPEARANCE

- In perception, something can *seem* blue without anything *being* blue.
- In contrast, if something is experienced as sublime, something *is* sublime.
- We can be wrong about what is sublime, but we cannot be wrong about whether the sublime is instantiated.
- The idea of an *incorrect* experience of the sublime is weird.

ERROR OF ATTRIBUTION

- Kant famously argued that judgments about the sublime involve an *error of attribution*: the sublime “is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind” (Kant, 1790, §28).
- There is sublimity *in* the very experience of the sublime.
- The statement “This is sublime” should mean something like “This can reveal my power to sublimate, transcend or transform myself”.

THE SUBLIME AS A PROPERTY

- Even if Intentionalism is rejected in favour of Adverbialism, the sublime could still be characterized as a (relational) property, i.e., as the disposition to trigger experiences of the sublime in certain conditions.
- What is not clear is how this characterization can make the sublime an *aesthetic* or more generally an *evaluative* property.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: WHAT ABOUT BEAUTY?

THE SUBLIME AS BEAUTY?

- On some accounts, the sublime is nothing but an extreme case of beauty: what is sublime is most beautiful.
 1. The experience of beauty is non-recalcitrant: “This seems beautiful, but it is not” is strained.
 2. The reality *vs* appearance distinction does not seem to apply to beauty either: if something *seems* beautiful, something *is* beautiful.

AN ASYMMETRY I/II

- Marin (1995) discusses how Nicolas Poussin “tried to represent the unrepresentable: the sublimity of a storm on earth”.
- We *can* represent (e.g., paint) sublime objects, such as a storm, but perhaps we *cannot* represent them *as* sublime.



AN ASYMMETRY II/II

- In contrast, we can represent (e.g., paint) beautiful objects as such, although perhaps only by producing a beautiful representation.
- Representations of beautiful objects can be *framed* in a way representations of sublime objects cannot (Brady, 2013).
- This may explain why we are inclined to preserve the notion of a beauty appearance, whereas the notion of a sublimity appearance is less plausible.

SUMMING UP: FORKING PATHS

- The sublime construed as an aesthetic evaluative property does not seem to play a central role in our experiences of the sublime.
- In particular, these experiences are not really, i.e., intentionally, *of* the sublime.
 - Some of us will conclude that experiences of the sublime are not aesthetic after all.
 - Others might want to extend Adverbialism to other aesthetic experiences, including experiences of beauty.

THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION/
MERCİ POUR VOTRE ATTENTION!