



Emily Brady. *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xi, 227 pages.

Consider being astonished and overwhelmed by the amazing panorama of space, galaxies stretching beyond grasp. Or imagine being stopped in your tracks by a raging storm with dark massive clouds, blasting thunder, and stunning bolts of lightning. In this book, Emily Brady analyzes these types of aesthetic experiences, sifting through the historical discussion of the sublime, identifying a core notion, and arguing for its importance to contemporary aesthetic theory and environmental philosophy. Brady distinguishes the sublime from other aesthetic features of nature (such as beauty) and from our reactions to artworks and then shows how the experience of the natural sublime involves a morally insightfully, increasingly important, relation between humans and nature.

According to Brady, the sublime is a difficult aesthetic experience involving “mixed emotions” with both positive and negative elements. Unlike the pure delight of the experience of beauty, involving tranquil, comfortable contemplation aimed at order and harmony and inspiring love, Brady argues that the sublime involves an edgy and anxious experience in response to nature’s vast and mighty forces, inspiring not love but esteem. There is excitement, admiration and a feeling of being uplifted, but there is also fear, frustration, or at least an uneasiness. Fleeing from a lake as the storm rolls in, one stands in a boathouse awestruck and frightened by the incredible lightning. One must be safe enough for the experience to be aesthetic, but not so safe that the sublime cannot be experienced (as would be the case watching a movie of the storm). For Brady, imagination is a key element of the experience, as it is expanded, invigorated, and eventually frustrated by its inability to take in the boundless vast scale and power of nature. Brady also includes a metaphysical dimension to the sublime, as the self sees itself in relation to mighty nature.

Half of the book is a history of the concept of the sublime from its origins as a type of rhetoric to the Romantic Sublime of the Transcendentalists and the North American wilderness aesthetic. Particular emphasis (two chapters) is placed on Kant’s account and defending it from the charge that it is anthropocentric and supports an attitude of human superiority over nature. Kant does say that the true object of the sublime is the human mind and its powers to transcend the sensible world as it takes in, appreciates, and measures itself against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature. Brady insists that for Kant the greatness of nature is a crucial part of this experience and she defends a humbling sublime against an egotistical conception. Nonetheless, she retains elements of this Kantian idea: “Judgments of the sublime,” she thinks, “involve dual valuing, admiration for the greatness in nature, and admiration for ourselves in our capacity to cope—where that capacity is not aimed at control or destruction” (p. 203). Brady worries that if we were too humbled by nature, we would simply be fearful, alienated, and paralyzed and this would not be conducive to environmental concern, nor to aesthetic experience. I think it true that because we linger over the edge of a deep canyon and are attracted by the roiling

waves and fierce winds of a hurricane, we do not find nature in these experiences to be thoroughly crushing or overwhelmingly threatening. But admiration of our ability to feel sufficient independence of nature's dominance to appreciate nature in these forms is neither true to the phenomenology of the experience, nor necessary for it to be conducive to environmental concern.

Brady argues that vast majority of art (and other human artifacts) cannot be sublime because they fail to "deliver the distinctive combination of qualities and responses we find in the original sublime" (p. 156). While some art forms, particularly avant-garde art, have some of these features to various degrees, the gestalt that we find in the sublime is lacking: massive scale or power, formless and unbounded character, unpredictability and disorder, evoking physical vulnerability, heightened emotions, expanded imagination, and metaphysical meaning. Brady argues that some architecture and land art are exceptions, offering analyses of encounters with skyscrapers and Smithsonian's Spiral Jetty (a 1,500-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide, rock coil extending into the Great Salt Lake) that suggest they are sublime. She also allows for the possibility that technological artifacts could be sublime: "The imposing wall of a high dam, a high-speed train thundering by, or a rocket blasting off, but I would emphasize, again, that the combination of qualities and effects are crucial" (p. 144).

Brady is particularly interested in locating the sublime in the context of other difficult aesthetic experiences (such as terrible beauty and tragedy) that involve negative emotions and explaining why they are valued and important. Consider the terrible beauty of predation: the exciting, high-speed drama of a powerful cheetah reducing the graceful gazelle to a bloody carcass. "Nature marred by industry"—as with pollution sunsets or the incredible colors and forms of some mining scars—are other examples of terrible beauty. In contrast to the sublime, here moral and aesthetic values come into conflict leading to a disturbing aesthetic response or possibly one that is blocked completely. Note that Brady's examples of the artifactual sublime may also involve moral considerations that affect their aesthetic character. For example, the dam may have flooded spectacular canyons.

Using a comparison with the paradox of tragedy (why seek out and enjoy narratives that cause painful emotions such as fear, sorrow, and anxiety?), Brady identifies a paradox of the sublime: how is it possible to seek out and enjoy confronting the terrible, bleakly indifferent, or overwhelming qualities of nature that indicate how puny and vulnerable we are? Her response does not rely on established strategies used to respond to the paradox of tragedy: that the pleasurable dimensions simply outweigh the painful ones, that the positive elements convert the negative emotions to pleasurable ones, or that the negative emotions are fictitious (e.g., we are not really afraid of the lightning). Instead, she repudiates the hedonistic account of value which underlies these paradoxes: value does not reduce to pleasure and we can seek out painful experiences because we find them rewarding in a variety of ways (other than being pleasurable). "Painful feeling feeds satisfaction: the

sublime is ‘more attractive the more fearful it is’” (p. 159). The negative emotions in the sublime do not need to be explained away: deeply felt emotions, even if in some sense unpleasant, can enrich our lives, build character, and edify. The natural sublime allows a richer grasp of remarkable nature and of our own limitations. Experiencing the serious and profound emotions of being overwhelmed by nature’s power and vastness are part of an emotionally intelligent and worthwhile life.

In the last chapter—the one most likely of interest to environmental ethicists—Brady ties the aesthetics of the sublime to an ethical relationship between humans and nature and answers a number of objections to this idea. The sublime, she writes, “engenders a distinctive type of aesthetics-moral relationship, and one that can contribute to our moral attitudes toward natural environments” (p. 183). Brady claims the sublime only potentially supports a moral valuing of nature because “there is no necessary connection between aesthetically valuing some place and also respecting and caring for it” (p. 201). But insofar as the sublime humbles us before a powerful and immense natural world and manifests our vulnerability, limited capacities, and comparative weakness, this aesthetic experience—in my opinion—clearly has moral implications for the human relationship with nature: it counteracts an arrogant, masterful attitude toward nature. Furthermore, admiration is key to the sublime and I do not see how admiration of something is compatible with not caring about its defilement or destruction.

In response to the charge that the sublime is anthropocentric and self-regarding, Brady highlights how the sublime fosters humility as nature’s greatness makes manifest human insignificance, weakening our normal self-centeredness. She counters the worry that the sublime focuses only on the value of wild, distant nature by pointing out that starry night skies and raging storms are experienced in rural and urban environments. In response to the worry that the sublime is dualistic, separating humans from an alien nature, Brady argues that in the sublime we realize we are part of nature, seeing ourselves as an ingredient in something much greater and overwhelming. Although the sublime involves an envioning experience with multi-sensory immersion, Brady argues that unlike the intimate, cozy experience of beauty, there is also an element of distance, bound with feelings of anxiety, vulnerability, uneasiness, and discomfort. I think that on Brady’s account, the sublime illustrates the important fact that humans are both part of and separate from nature.

Brady worries that some may think the sublime is a historically outmoded experience of nature. The idea is that in a world of increasing technological management of nature, we have become less fearful and awed by nature: “Great mountains and the vast sea may no longer evoke that edgy feeling of the sublime and anxious pleasure it involves” (p. 185). Brady rejects this suggestion, pointing out that technology also allows us greater access to sublime places and experiences via adventure tourism, extreme sports, and the like, thus providing more opportunities for experiencing the sublime than in the past. Further, the great things in nature have not disappeared,

nor has our admiration for them: The night sky, huge waterfalls, great thunder and lightning storms, wide, deep canyons still strike us with awe and admiration.

Brady is certainly right that experiences of the natural sublime still occur and are readily available. But in light of anthropogenic climate change and the recent rhetoric of “The Anthropocene” about “human-created nature” and a “human-managed Earth,” this issue deserves further consideration. The natural sublime is an encounter with an overpowering nature, something beyond our grasp, not made or subject to our control, and in comparison to which humans are an “insignificant trifle.” The Anthropocene boosters will have to argue away these experiences as illusory and claim they are based on a misunderstanding of the current human-nature relationship. But it is the defenders of the “age of man” who see us as planetary engineers and think of Earth as our garden who are—in my opinion—deluded. With the ongoing, human assault on the natural world, now more than ever is the time to encourage and embrace the sublime encounter with nature. Empirical evidence shows that the experience of the sublime helps us become more other focused and encourages humility about our place in the world. As Brady points out: “We have a continuing need for the sublime and wonder in face of massive appropriation and domination of nature by humans. In an important sense, aesthetic experience of this kind can bring home some of the ways we cannot place ourselves over and above nature” (p. 197).

The book is a considerable achievement and an important one for those working in aesthetics or environmental philosophy. There is great insight here about a significant aesthetic experience and the light it sheds on the human relation to nature. Those interested in the historical development of the notion of the sublime should also pay attention to this book. Brady has made her case that the sublime deserves a prominent place in contemporary aesthetics and environmental thought.

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