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THE KANTIAN SUBLIME
AND THE REVELATION OF FREEDOM

The sublime is one of the most obscure terms of Kantian philosophy. Its definition is rather ambiguous and Kant himself doesn't explain what is the role of such an aesthetic feeling. Recently some critical works on Kantian aesthetics have tried to put the sublime in relation to the systematic transition from nature to freedom. With *The Kantian sublime and the revelation of freedom*, Robert Clewis offers a new reading of the Kantian sublime, that goes beyond all the studies made in the '70s and in the '80s on this topic of aesthetics. In particular, Clewis drifts away from the interpretation of Lyotard and provides his analysis out of a renewed interest in the role of aesthetic experience in morality and, conversely, of morality's role in aesthetics. Clewis fits in with the interpretation of Kantian aesthetics, of which the main exponents are Paul Guyer, Allen Wood, Henry Allison; but Clewis' interpretation is also very original in clarifying some elements connected to the sublime.

The aim of Clewis' work is to highlight how the Kantian sublime can reveal moral freedom and how enthusiasm can be considered a form of the sublime in a Critical sense. In order to demonstrate these two elements, the starting point is the idea that the sublime *indirectly* realizes morals into the natural world. As also Guyer claims, Clewis supports that the feeling of sublime prepares us for moral agency and enthusiasm, as particular forms of the sublime help us recognizing the morally good. Clewis tries, then, to look at the role of the sublime in general and at the aesthetically sublime experience of enthusiasm in particular, and he puts them in relation to the transitional problem concerning the realization of morality in the natural order. In Clewis' work, the problem of transition is conceived primarily in the practical and non-systematic sense; that is to say the transition is not

considered here as the mediation between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom. The transition consists, instead, in the actualization of morals in the natural world and it concerns how the supersensible in the subject can determine the sensible with regard to the consequences in nature. Clewis work perfectly answers the demand in the Kantian studies for a combination of aesthetics and morals.

In this perspective, Clewis looks at the sublime as a feeling that can contribute to morality by awakening interest. In order to demonstrate this thesis, Clewis highlights how the sublime is connected with enthusiasm and this connection explains the relationship between the sublime and morality. First of all, the sublime indicates something purposive in nature in order to reveal something purposive in ourselves, as well as enthusiasm makes «palpable» human freedom. Enthusiasm is, in fact, «a feeling of freedom to do the morally good». Clewis' work demonstrates then a very original thesis by highlighting how enthusiasm, as an encouraging moral sign, contributes to reinforce the relationship between the sublime and morals, by awakening a moral interest in reason.

This thesis is demonstrated also through an accurate historical reconstruction of the sublime in the *Observations* and the *Remarks*. An exam of the genesis of Kantian sublime, in fact, confirms Clewis' idea that we can talk about three different forms of the feeling of sublime: beyond the mathematical and the dynamical sublime, Clewis supports that in the Kantian philosophy we can also find the moral sublime. Differently from other Kantian interpreters, and, in particular, differently from Lyotard, Clewis pays a lot of attention to the moral sublime. This particular form of sublime is the aesthetic and disinterested response to the moral law, which reveals the positive practical freedom, that is the ability to act from a priori moral motives. The moral sublime corresponds therefore the effect on consciousness of the observation of the moral law from a disinterested and aesthetical perspective, rather than from a practical point of view. This form of sublime includes moreover the sublime of mental states, among which enthusiasm is included. Enthusiasm, therefore, is a particular form of moral sublime that appears as an affective contemplation of the idea of good. By examining aesthetic enthusiasm, certainly the most original aspect of the book, Clewis finally

succeeds in his aim to demonstrate how the sublime can reveal moral freedom.

By referring to Plato, Clewis also compares Platonic enthusiasm to Kantian interest for the French Revolution: Kant's interest in enthusiasm for the idea of republic, in fact, is taken by Clewis as an example of intellectual interest in the sublime. Understanding this interest in enthusiasm allows us not only to highlight the feeling of the sublime, but also to better comprehend Kant's view of the French Revolution.

Although the reference on Kantian interest for the French Revolution opens up a discussion on Kantian political thought that is not carried out by the author (this topic is directly approached only in the short Chapter Six), *The Kantian sublime and the revelation of freedom* by Robert Clewis has the great merit of bringing to scholars' attention the problem of aesthetic enthusiasm as a form of the sublime that reveals moral freedom.

R.R. Clewis, *The Kantian sublime and the revelation of freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.