

The Sublime for the Living: A Dialogue

Robert R. Clewis,
clewis.r@gmercyu.edu

Kathrine Cuccuru
k.cuccuru@sussex.ac.uk

Following the tradition of the philosophical dialogue, we reimagine our real conversation where we come to understand our respective views on the sublime. We aim to do so in a way that respects both the sublime's complex philosophical past and its emerging future in empirical research. As in a traditional dialogue, this contrivance is supposed to enact a philosophical exchange. The following conversation reveals the interlocutors' diverging, converging, and shifting understanding of the sublime in a way that a verbatim interview transcript or a co-authored treatise could not. Moreover, its setting is indicative of the conversation's current moment: the scene is the virtual Zoom room.

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Robert R. Clewis,
clewis.r@gmercyu.edu

Kathrine Cuccuru
k.cuccuru@sussex.ac.uk

Open meeting link...Join with computer audio...Cameras on

Robert: Hi Kathrine!

Kathrine: Hey...Robert...can you hear me?

R: I can hear you...and see you. How about me, is my microphone working?

K: Yes. So you want to talk?

R: Right, let's talk about the sublime.

K: What makes you interested in talking about the sublime with me?

R: I've been working on a theory of the sublime lately, as well as studying the sublime's history. I was "at" your paper, delivered online in December 2020, on the history of aesthetics, where you also discussed the sublime¹. I thought, ok, there's someone I'd like to get back to. And maybe even disagree with!

¹ K. Cuccuru, *The Problem with the History of Aesthetics, Before Aesthetics*, unpublished manuscript. Project for British Society of Aesthetics Postdoctoral Fellowship, 2019-20. Conference paper presented at the American Society of Aesthetics, Annual Meeting, online, 9-14 November 2020, and invited paper at the London Aesthetics Forum, online, 2 December 2020.

K: I see. In that paper, I do observe and challenge historians of aesthetics' conventional approach to the field's concepts, especially for my philosophical love, the sublime. But, it is to serve my aim to open us up to different, multiple approaches to the philosophical history of the sublime. Rather self-servingly, I just want to be able to play in my sublime history of philosophy playground in my own unconventional way. And hopefully others do too. What's disagreeable about that? Everyone's invited!

R: I accept a great deal in your more inclusive approach to the history of the sublime. I would call it a «more-than-the-aesthetic» approach to the sublime. I think many of your criticisms of mainstream histories are justified, but when you criticize some remarks I make in the Introduction to *The Sublime Reader*², I think your «more-than-the-aesthetic» claim that's meant to challenge what historians of aesthetics do, doesn't apply to what I'm doing in an anthology on the sublime. As editor, one of my primary aims was to select texts according to what the «sublime» and «aesthetics» mean for the living. And, today, the sublime is seen as largely or almost exclusively an aesthetic concept. So we have to bear in mind the pragmatic and economic dimensions involved in selecting and editing texts for an anthology. In that light, it seems natural to be driven by the contemporary conceptions of the aesthetic.

K: It's a great anthology, an important resource for exploring the aesthetic sublime of – as you put it – the living. Perhaps you (and anthology editors generally) aren't my real target. Still, for my purpose of expanding history of philosophy approaches to the sublime of the dead, your Introduction elegantly and explicitly articulates the negative definition of the aesthetic³. The one I charge historians of aesthetics with systematically using to isolate the putative «aesthetic concept» of the sublime throughout philosophical history. I argue that such a conventional approach problematically reduces accounts of the sublime prior to the mid-eighteenth-century establishment of the concept of the aesthetic to the extent that they anticipate our so-called living concept.

R: Sure. But I fully recognize and appreciate, philosophically or theoretically speaking, that there are many sides or aspects to the sublime – the moral, the aesthetic, the theological. That's why I wrote in the

² R. Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019.

³ It is described as a «negative definition» because it defines the «aesthetic» in terms of what it is not. It states: «To say that the experience of the sublime is an «aesthetic» one is first and foremost to say what it is not. An aesthetic experience is neither an ordinary, day-to-day experience nor a moral one». R. Clewis, *Introduction*, in *The Sublime Reader*, cit., p. 2.

Intro: «I have suggested that the sublime can be considered an “aesthetic” experience. (We need not insist that it is *only* an aesthetic experience, of course)». And then on the next page: «As mentioned, one need not insist that the sublime is only or exclusively an “aesthetic” experience. The concept of the sublime (or “sublimes”) could be examined relative to political, moral, or religious contexts as well»⁴.

K: Even accepting that there are many «sublimes», my worry remains that historians of aesthetics are still dogmatically presupposing an anticipatory picture, where the philosophically relevant pre-aesthetic accounts of the sublime are only those – or aspects of them – that anticipate the subsequent full-blooded aesthetic concept of the sublime, primarily Kant’s but also Burke’s⁵.

R: Actually, I explicitly wanted to avoid an «all-roads-lead-to-Kant» approach⁶. Though I was juggling several aims (sometimes incompatible with each other)⁷, one of the things I wanted to do was revise the «canon» of the sublime. I wanted to highlight previously overlooked authors, such as the eighteenth-century British women writers. Consistent with this, I also chose some thinkers who don’t give purely «aesthetic» accounts of the sublime, such as Longinus and Petrarch. Petrarch’s experience at the top of Mount Ventoux is at once religious, moral, and aesthetic. He’s making a confession to God. He’s looking inside himself and judging the transience of everyday or mundane affairs. And he’s taking in the grandeur or «sublimity» of the mountain scenery⁸. Though I don’t think he uses the word «sublime» here, he is clearly undergoing or having an experience of the sublime – based on what we consider to be the sublime. Finally, Longinus’s conception of the sublime is not mainly, or only, an aesthetic concept. It is also a moral and political one.

K: I think it’s important to highlight the significance of you stating that you don’t think Petrarch uses «the word “sublime” here». It indicates that you are interested in finding and isolating instances of the contemporary aesthetic notion of the sublime in historical accounts. And that’s cool. Whereas, I’m just

⁴ Ivi, pp. 2-3.

⁵ For a couple of recent examples, see: E. Brady, *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013); R. Doran, *The Theory of the Sublime From Longinus to Kant* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015).

⁶ R. Clewis, *Introduction*, in *The Sublime Reader*, p. 8.

⁷ Ivi, p. 5.

⁸ F. Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, in R. Clewis (ed.), *The Sublime Reader*, cit., pp. 49–54.

not interested in that. Instead, I'm interested in exploring how the term sublime was philosophically understood at a particular time (or times) in (or throughout) history.

R: I'm interested in such an approach too. For instance, I think it would be valuable to evaluate *sublimitas* or *sublimis* in Augustine and other writers of Latin in the late ancient and medieval traditions like Bonaventure and Aquinas. Here, *sublimis* often had moral and religious meanings and contexts. I could have included texts by Bonaventure or Aquinas, but they did not strike me as being as interesting or readable as other options. Again the aims of creating a marketable anthology constrained my choices⁹.

K: You're right. Serious philosophical investigation into more of these thinkers and their use of the sublime (and cognates) would be super valuable. Yet, from your description, the implied sense of evaluating these ancient and medieval «sublimes», is simply to replace isolating the «aesthetic» with isolating the «moral», «political», «religious», etc. Then, perhaps add them all together. And that's still cool. However, alongside the isolationist and additive approaches, I want to make intellectual space for a history of philosophy approach that aims to identify why and how the sublime is important to, what philosophical job it is doing in, these historical discussions of it, unconstrained by our contemporary philosophical categories¹⁰.

R: There is space for that and you should be free to do that. But I would also add that we ought to be allowed to call «sublime» experiences that exhibit certain basic features (identified traditionally as indicative of the sublime), even when people describing them do not use the word «sublime». If you don't accept this, you risk denying that the sublime is cross-cultural, when it clearly seems to be. Accordingly, I think we should study texts from China and Japan even though they don't use the word «sublime». And, of course, it is worth bearing in mind that Longinus uses *hypsous* and German writers *das Erhabene*. These are just translations of *sublimis* (or vice versa). So I wouldn't focus too much on the employment of a particular term.

⁹ On these pragmatic concerns, see R. Clewis, *Introduction*, in Id., *The Sublime Reader*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ An early attempt at this sort of approach: K. Cuccuru, *That «Tremendous» Mr Dennis: The Sublime, Common Sense, and Criticism*, in H. Kerr, D. Lemmings, R. Phiddian (eds.), *Passions, Sympathy and Print Culture: Public Opinion and Emotional Authenticity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2016, pp. 105–121.

K: Ok, so there are two things going on here. One, is tracking the concept – an experience with certain features that can be seen in various works across time and cultures – and the other is tracking the term «sublime» as it appears in particular historical and cultural contexts. And as we have agreed these two different approaches can work alongside each other.

R: Right. But I have a concern about the notion that we are (as you put it) «unconstrained». Is it even possible to be unconstrained by our contemporary philosophical categories? It seems that we cannot avoid approaching the topic from this historically situated perspective. And besides, would we really *want* to be free in this way, even if we could be? I should think we always want to speak to the present in some way.

K: No, I don't think we can escape our living, contemporary notions, in this case our concept of the aesthetic. However, my worry is using it as a default, especially when it is claimed to be philosophically harmless or innocent¹¹. I am calling for more self-awareness, especially when historians of aesthetics seek them out in pre-aesthetic accounts. Self-aware that these notions have theoretical «baggage».

R: Right. Even if we can't fully bracket the concept of the thing at hand (the sublime, the aesthetic) when we are investigating them in the history of philosophy and the history of ideas, we should recognize our limitations and presuppositions.

K: With that in mind, how are you thinking about creating space for what you've been calling other «sublimes?» The religious, moral, and so on.

R: When it comes to *theorizing* the sublime I'm a «splitter» rather than a «lumper». In other words, I think we should have the distinctions between the aesthetic, practical or moral, and the religious or theological. Such distinctions seem useful for understanding and classifying a diverse range of experiences and the events or things that elicit them. I'm here drawing from thinkers like Kant and

¹¹ For instance, R. Glauser claims that he employs the *aesthetic* in the «innocent sense of an experience through which beauty is apprehended and appreciated». See R. Glauser, *Aesthetic Experience in Shaftesbury*, in «The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume», 76 (2002), pp. 25–54, p. 2. Similarly, Alessandro Giovannelli states that «the identification of aesthetics with the philosophy of art is harmless enough not to raise worries» regarding its etymological origins and other historical considerations. See his editor's *Introduction*, in A. Giovannelli, *Aesthetics: Key Thinkers*, Continuum, London 2012, p. 3.

Kierkegaard. The distinctions between the aesthetic, moral, and religious seem useful for understanding and classifying a diverse range of experiences and the events or things that elicit them.

K: Just to get clear, what do you mean by splitter and lumper? What is being split, or indeed, lumped?

R: The different spheres that, following Kant, were separated off or seen as distinct. Before Kant, many thinkers from Plato to Baumgarten tended to lump or blend these spheres together. I realize that some think that the concept of the «aesthetic» (as we mean it today) is a late modern invention (due in large part to Kant), but I think the concept of an «aesthetic» sphere is useful for theorizing. To clarify a little bit what I mean here: the aesthetic sphere is a function of the *objects* related to (say, typically art), and/or the particular «aesthetic» *mode of engagement* with them, the absorbed attention we give to them.

K: So this splitting and lumping talk appears to map onto, and to be generally consistent with, the familiar story of the establishment of the term and the concept of the aesthetic in mid-eighteenth-century Europe. In no way do I dispute this accepted overarching history of aesthetics narrative. But I do have concerns over how historians of aesthetics approach this narrative.

R: Ok, what's the issue?

K: My concern is that it perpetuates (perhaps inadvertently) the troubling tendency to understand the narrative in terms of a grand developmental line. Where it is assumed that – as you label them – these primitive «lumpers» are merely the undeveloped, even confused, forebears of Kant, the premier «splitter», who is regularly proclaimed to properly establish philosophical aesthetics.

R: That's fair enough. As mentioned, I don't see the history of aesthetics as a progressive march towards Kant.

K: No doubt, there is also a sincere shift to diversify and add nuance to our understanding of pre-Kantian accounts of the sublime. But, as I see it, historians of aesthetics' general aim remains the same.

That is, to identify and isolate the «aesthetic» bit of such accounts. And applying your sense of «lumper» doesn't (at least obviously) deviate from that aim. Instead, it just lumps it together with the other sublime bits – the «religious» bit, the «moral» bit, the «rhetorical» bit. In a way it is «splitter» by subterfuge, conforming to the isolationist and additive approach I mentioned earlier. For me, then, the additive lumping risks continuing to not fully capture what is going on with these pre-aesthetic accounts of the sublime. My proposed intellectual space is still not realized.

R: But don't these pre-Kantian thinkers sometimes use these distinctions themselves? For instance, Shaftesbury talks of both the good and the beautiful, and he then seems to *unite* or identify them. Of course, that's the beautiful and we are talking about the sublime here. So perhaps Baumgarten is a better example, because he devotes a large portion (in fact, the longest chapter) of the *Aesthetica* (1750) to the sublime. He interprets it in a way that is thoroughly practically oriented. The sublime is supposed to make us fully developed and happy human beings, the *felix aestheticus*. Yet aesthetics is still always distinct from ethics, for Baumgarten¹².

K: Sure, you will see explicit distinctions and varied usage of the sublime throughout all these accounts. One of the most significant is made in response to Longinus, where Boileau and then others separate *the* sublime from sublime style¹³. I also grant that my appeal for intellectual space and alternative approaches is not necessarily relevant when your aim is to track the sublime as a sort of «aesthetic» experience (whether it is called the sublime or not) over time or at a particular time or place. However, if, as I do, you want to identify the named concept of the sublime as it was used at a particular time, in its original context, then understanding these accounts in terms of lumping (as in adding the various category-bits together) no longer appears helpful because again it presupposes philosophical categories that might not be relevant to or even in play for these historical thinkers.

R: This leads to something else I wanted to ask about «contextualist» approaches like yours. I actually adopt a similar approach, but I admit there is a risk: it could generate too many «sublimes». The Burkean sublime, the Wordsworthian sublime, the Kantian sublime, and on and on. Consider the perspective of those conducting empirical research into the topic. They need to identify and characterize

¹² R. Clewis, *The Majesty of Cognition: The Sublime in Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and Kant*, in C. McQuillan, *Baumgarten's Aesthetics*, Roman & Littlefield, Lanham 2021, pp. 241–72.

¹³ Boileau, cit. in R. Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, p. 59.

what it is we are talking about. Without an agreed upon notion of the experience of sublime, how could the neuroscientists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists investigate the topic? And how could philosophers come up with better, more nuanced theories of it? Maybe for philosophers it is less pressing of an issue, but it's unclear how the scientists could conduct their research, if they have to take a completely nuanced, contextualist approach. If they want to research and communicate about a topic or theme, they need to have a minimal description of it, a common understanding.

K: So this potential «too many sublimes» just seems to take «splitting» to the extreme, rather than the sort of contextualization that I am interested in or advocating. That is to locate historical views of the sublime in their original context, where typically they are attempting to describe or conceptualize a shared phenomenon, and establish a theory of it. Of course, for every theorizer there will be a theory. Each with their own variations and idiosyncrasies. In this sense, these are all various sublimes, be it Burke's, Wordsworth's, Kant's, etc. And I think focusing on just one of these « sublimes » seems arbitrary and not particularly useful for empirical research. However, taking notice of the descriptions of the experience of the sublime found in these sorts of accounts across the history of philosophy, and looking at their common features, probably would be useful.

R: So let me see if I understand you. When we offer a philosophical *theory* of the sublime, presumably it's about the same phenomenon that other theorists are trying to identify and describe. We can then go back to the concept's history for inspiration about how best to think about the phenomenon or experience.... Ok, I think that works.

K: Yes, that is how I am thinking about it. When it comes to empirical research, I'm not sure that there's much value in focusing on individual theorists, especially if it employs the sort of top-down approach that starts with someone like Burke or Kant, and then aims to test their account somehow. Or similarly aims to test which one, Burke or Kant, is «true» or «right».

R: That's not how I conceive of empirical research on the sublime either. And thankfully, I don't think anyone is really interested in testing or verifying Burke or Kant in that sense. Still there may be elements of their accounts that people are interested in exploring, such as, the capacity of nature vs. art

to act as a stimulus, or how self-aware we are in the experience, or to what extent in the sublime we feel free from the mundane.

K: I agree that for empirical research, we need a bottom-up approach that begins by finding a common ground about what the sublime is. There is a crucial difference between *describing* – moreover, giving a philosophical account of, a phenomenon, as the likes of Kant and Burke do – and the phenomenon or experience itself. When it comes to a phenomenon, there is a common «we all know it when we see it» sense and we don't necessarily need to know its name, or even have a name for it. In our case, we «sense the sublime when we feel it» – that wow! feeling when, say, we experience those grand paradigmatic examples of ragged mountains and crashing oceans. Then as philosophers, we build theories that attempt to explain these sorts of «feels», and that's where we get the many different theories bearing the name sublime. But significantly, these theories' starting point, their common ground, is the phenomenon, named the «sublime» or not. And relatedly, these theoretical descriptions of the phenomenon itself, will be what you look for with your aim to track the pre-aesthetic and cross-cultural history of the experience of the sublime.

R: Right. Can you maybe elaborate with an example?

K: Let's consider an analogy with the notion of «sexual harassment». We accept that the phenomenon or experience has always been around, and we observe that its salient features have been described, implied or alluded to throughout history. But, due to various historical factors, only relatively recently did a specific term for it emerge, and offer intellectual space for the subsequent explicit philosophical discussion, with multiple and varying theories of it.¹⁴

Similarly, due to various historical factors, the phenomenon or experience of a particular transporting feeling, a certain affective response is explicitly named the «sublime». Still, it seems clear that the salient features of the phenomenon have been, likewise, always around and described throughout history.

¹⁴ For a general introduction to the term «sexual harassment» as a feminist innovation, see J. Saul, E. Diaz-Leon, *Feminist Philosophy of Language*, in E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 Edition, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/feminism-language/>.

R: So in the case of the sublime, we could say that the experience has certain features we could specify, that it has to be (e.g.) an affective response similar to awe, a thrill or exhilaration in response to a vast or powerful object, one that is experienced in a new or rare way, while not being the same as outright fear, and so on. Then you could let the empirical scientists create all sorts of studies based on such a common understanding of the phenomenon.

K: I further suggest that the sublime's philosophical history might help us identify the features to be tested. To bring together the empirical researchers' aim to investigate the phenomenon (rather than every theoretical view that bears the name «sublime»), and your suggested philosophical aim to identify accounts of the sublime experience across time and place. We can look back across historical accounts prior to the establishment of the term to observe where the experience of its salient features are described, and perhaps then even theorized about. Potentially, forming a general record of the target phenomenon.

R: «Establishment of the term?» But the term was established in ancient Greece. Or do you mean before it was «baptized» as an aesthetic term in the eighteenth century?

K: Of course, the term «sublime» has a complex history. One that has both Greek (*peri hypsous*) and Latin (*sublimis*) aspects, and it also converges and diverges from the target phenomenon. And as we mentioned earlier, it is one deserving of more exploration. Yet, continuing the analogy with the term «sexual harassment», I am just pointing to the eighteenth-century «baptism» of the English term «sublime». It marks the explicit connection – at least in English philosophy (and European counterparts) – between the term and the phenomenal experience that contemporary philosophical aesthetics recognizes as the sublime. In turn, it informs our current general understanding, and establishes the phenomenal features that we might want to test.

R: I started working with some psychologists interested in the sublime (and awe) because it seemed to me that some of the claims made by philosophers like Schopenhauer or Dennis could lend themselves to empirical testing. As mentioned, I thought we should explore what counts as an appropriate elicitor of the experience, comparing nature and art as stimuli.

K: What did you find out?

R: One of our studies suggested that both nature and art are equally potent stimuli of the experience of the sublime, but evoke the experience with different nuances. Experiencing the sublime in nature gave more of a sense of «presence» than art did. Which may be unsurprising. Perhaps more interesting is that the sublime in nature was found to have more «vastness» and to be more of a potential threat to existential safety. In other words, it seemed more fearsome¹⁵.

K: We now usually focus on «fear», as a defining feature of the sublime, with its eighteenth-century origins in, for instance, Burke who describes a sort of «modified terror» that elicits «delight»¹⁶. Yet beside that sort of view, there is a longstanding discussion of the response to the sense of the self in relation to the object of experience. You mentioned Dennis and Schopenhauer – they both offer versions of this. So Dennis’s feeling of transport centers on the self, which he describes as a sort of pride in the capacity of the human mind to have such great thoughts about the objects. In contrast, Schopenhauer understands the response in terms of the loss of self in relation to the object.

R: Right, I think of Dennis as offering a «self-admiration» theory of the sublime, where the mind has (as he puts it) a «conscious view of its own excellency». And as you say, Schopenhauer emphasizes a sense of a loss of self in the sublime¹⁷. So, to take up your question about empirical research, we could examine whether or not the experience is self-reflective, or the role of the self in the sublime, along the lines psychologists have done with awe. Here, I think, researchers need to be much clearer about the relation, or distinction, between an experience being *self-directed* and its being an experience of *self-loss*. Are you (during the experience) self-consciously *aware* that your self is «small» and «diminished» as the empirical literature calls it?

K: I agree. When Schopenhauer talks about the loss of self, he is not thinking of a diminished self, that is, where the subject realizes its diminutiveness in relation to the object of experience. Rather, he is

¹⁵ A. Chirico, R. Clewis, D. B. Yaden, A. Gaggioli, *Nature versus Art as Elicitors of the Sublime: A Virtual Reality Study*, in «PLOS One», 16 (3), 2021.

¹⁶ Burke writes in the section «Of the Sublime»: «When danger or pain press to nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful» (R. Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, cit., p. 79).

¹⁷ J. Dennis, cit. in R. Clewis, *The Sublime Reader*, p. 62; A. Schopenhauer, cit. *ivi*, p. 195.

suggesting that the subject, the self, no longer stands in relation to the object of experience at all. The self is altogether lost in the experience. So there is no sense in which Schopenhauer's described experience is self-reflective.

R: And in Kant interpretation too, self-reflection in the sublime is a hoary topic. Kant's commentators often interpret him as saying that the sublime must be self-reflective in that the experiencer becomes *aware* of the «powers of reason». ¹⁸ That would make Kant's a kind of self-admiration theory, in my view. But I would conjecture that such a claim (that self-admiration is a necessary element of the experience of the sublime) is false, a verdict that also seems confirmed by empirical research. Applying the principle of charity, then, I didn't want to interpret Kant as making a claim that is likely false.

To put it another way, there is a reading of Kant which says that self-reflection or recognition «of the powers of reason» is necessary for the experience. But I want to read Kant as saying it's only possible, not necessary. Using his language, we might put it like this. In the sublime, our capacity for reason interacts with the imagination. This activity or interaction is a transcendental condition of the possibility of the experience of the sublime, but *recognition* of that fact (or, of the powers of reason) need not be part of the content of the experience.

K: Absolutely. Failing to acknowledge this would reduce Kant's transcendental argument to a purely empirical one.

R: Exactly, and interpreting Kant in this transcendental way also seems more consistent with his own philosophical method, which is after all transcendental philosophy.

K: Perhaps, looking at the nuances in these historical accounts reveals that – whether the empirical researchers realize it or not – on their account, they are making no real distinction between the ways they understand self-reflection. That is, their sense of *self-loss* which is understood as a diminished or «small» self is just another way to be *self-directed*.

¹⁸ For criticisms on this common interpretation, see R. Clewis, *Imagination, Vital Forces, and Self-Consciousness in the Kantian Sublime*, in J. Mesch (ed.), *Kant and the Feeling of Life*, SUNY Press, Albany, forthcoming.

R: Yes. When empirical researchers claim that in the sublime (or at least in awe) people feel a *sense* of «small» or «diminished» self, it sounds like they are making the claim (even if they might not mean it this way) that one's attention is *directed* at the self. But in fact what their research has shown is that in the experience our attention is outward and externally directed, not focused on the self.

K: Well, your analysis there shows how philosophy and philosophers of the sublime might bring real benefits to the empirical research on it. But before we bring things to a close, I'd like to know, given your interest in tracking the *experience* of the sublime, and your work with experimental psychologists – what do you take the sublime to be?

R: The term «sublime» is used in many ways, but just to provide a (provisional) concluding remark, let's say that *the experience of the sublime is a bivalent or mixed, but overall positive, feeling of uplift and exhilaration similar to awe, a feeling not simply to be identified with fear and terror, and which is felt in the face of an object that is vast and/or powerful, where the object is novel or rare (or, even when it is familiar, is at least experienced as being novel or rare)*¹⁹. Sometimes the elicitor can be menacing or threatening, even if it does not (during the experience) evoke fear in the person. An example of such an object – to take one from nature – would be a great storm or hurricane seen from a safe vantage point. Still, the stimulus need not be menacing. It can just be really vast, or at least bigger than things and events we are used to.

K: This's a familiar philosophical view, in the tradition of (what I call) Burke's «terrible delight».

R: Yes, among other British writers, as well as Kant and Schopenhauer. But I make no claim to originality here! I see myself as drawing from the histories of the sublime when I put forward this conception of it. I think this is one of the ways that theorists should engage the history of aesthetics, making it useful to both empirical research and theoretical work.

K: That sounds great to me. Thank you for the conversation.

R: There's a lot of work to do, but at least we have something of a start.

¹⁹ R. Clewis, *Towards a Theory of the Sublime and Aesthetic Awe*, in Id. (ed.), *The Sublime Reader* cit., pp. 340–54.
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The foregoing dialogue, freed of both the asymmetry of the interviewer-interviewee relation and the apparently unified view of a co-authored paper, reveals how distinct views can profitably interact with each other. It also shows how our perspectives are shaped by our philosophical objectives. For Robert, a principal aim is to identify and track the aesthetic experience of the sublime historically, cross-culturally, and empirically, and for Kathrine it is to identify and track the philosophical use of the term «sublime» (and cognates) in its various historical places and times. While we diverge in our scope and approach, our views converge in several important respects.

One important point of convergence is that whichever approach one employs, it needs to be carried out in a theoretically self-aware way. We suggest that establishing properly self-aware starting conditions is particularly useful at the intersection of philosophy and empirical research on the sublime. As philosophers, we can offer insight into the theoretical commitments and historical context of the current understanding of the sublime. And in turn, we can help formulate guiding questions for empirical testing and clarify conceptual issues like (as discussed) a robust concept of self-reflection that clearly distinguishes self-attention from self-loss.

We believe that our philosophical understanding of the sublime would also benefit from empirically exploring the various questions, ideas, and theories we mentioned. For instance, empirical psychology potentially offers ways to investigate: which objective features elicit the experience across aesthetic objects (paradigmatically, natural landscape, but also poetry, painting, music, theater); which subjective features are evident in participant responses, such as the role of fear, the sense of self/self-awareness (or not) and time perception, and the feeling of freedom (imaginative play); the sublime's relation to the associated aesthetic experiences of wonder, beauty, and awe; and the extent that the experience of the sublime is cross-cultural. Similarly, clinically oriented psychologists might pursue how to apply the benefits of the sublime experience, say in promoting wonder about art or science, or using technologies to bring the sublime to a wider range of people. Finally, the approaches employed by neuroscience seem well suited to exploring some of the ideas that do not lend themselves to study by self-reports or narrative accounts, such as how and when the imagination (an ability to represent or conceive what is possible) is activated, and whether (as many philosophers claimed) the imagination is «expanded» in sublime experiences.

Currently, there are very few empirical studies of the sublime. While in the case of awe there is the comprehensive, validated AWE-Scale, we have so far seen only partial, preliminary measures of the sublime. To avoid the risk of introducing ad hoc and incommensurable measures and elements to any new studies, we recommend establishing a comprehensive, validated scale that can be replicated and engaged with across studies. Doing so would form a major contribution to advancing empirical research on the sublime. We also think that qualitative methods are potentially useful. For example, individual conceptual and narrative accounts might shed light on how to interpret self-reported measures of the sublime.

Finally, we submit that a formidable challenge to a fruitful exchange between philosophy and empirical research is that faced by all interdisciplinary work: finding colleagues willing and able to cross over disciplinary boundaries. However, we hope our dialogue encourages it by showing how an exchange of views, even if sometimes divergent, can improve our contemporary understanding of «the sublime for the living».