

A Philosophical Enquiry

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October 13-19, 2014

The notion of the 'sublime' was a very topical concept during the 18th century. Burke addressed the issue in this book written in his late twenties. It is thus to be considered as the result of a youthful exuberance, but not necessarily to be rejected as juvenilia. It was not uncommon during the period, when most academic careers allowed shortcuts, and already as a young man you could be sufficiently read to tackle philosophical issues.

The style of the enquiry is very much that of the 18th century intellectual and reminds you of Hume, Smith and Gibbons, although with not the same force and elegance. The work is presented in five parts, and intended to be very pedagogical, with short sections, with clear headings, guiding the reader through a sequence of arguments, no doubt inspired by legal and mathematical presentation.

It is typical that Burke consistently refers to God or Providence, to explain many things in the nature, surprisingly well-adopted to useful ends. Before the advent of Darwin a century later, this intricate web of startling interconnections must have been quite mysterious, and there is no wonder that the existence of a thoughtful creator, or at least teleological causes in the spirit of Aristotle, were habitually invoked.

Burke starts with the fact of two passions of humans, and no doubt also present in animals, namely those of pleasure and pain. Burke makes an emphatic point that those are positive passions, in the sense that they exist on their own, and not just in relation to something else. In particular pleasure is no mere absence of pain, as many philosophers have claimed, both before and after Burke. Of course a pain that ceases does engender a relief and a comfort, but that kind of negative pleasure, Burke prefers to designate by the word 'delight'. Similarly there is a kind of negative pain in the cessation of pleasure, which he identifies as grief. But those are marginal to the thrust of his main argument. Basically people are in a state of indifference, a kind of default of the mind.

Central to Burke is the asymmetry between pain and pleasure. Pain is imposed from the outside, and is something we are forced to submit to. It is hence involuntary and thus associated with an excess of power, more powerful than our own. Pleasure on the other hand, is something we seek out and submit to voluntarily, in a sense, it is we who overpower external sources, making them do our biddings. Grief is not real pain, because it is something we manufacture ourselves, and which we are liable to indulge in. Pain we never indulge in, it is something we want to avoid at all costs. When we take an interest in the misfortune of others, something we can do because of our power of sympathy which allows us to imagine those misfortunes, we are really delighted, as long as we are convinced that we are not going to be affected ourselves. The delight consists exactly in this relief of not being subjected to the pain. The fact that we can indulge in that feeling voluntarily, although we would not refer to it as delight but rather as pity and compassion, shows that it does not really pain us. If it really did we would of course not dwell on it, but banish it

from our thoughts¹.

Fear is the emotion associated with the expectation of pain and death. Just as pain distorts the body, and monopolizes all conscious thought, fear has the same effect in apprehension, although one surmises with less force. The fear of death does not ordinarily lead to death itself. And it is here the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime shows itself. Beauty inspires love and pleasure, while the sublime inspires terror. Weaker forms of terror are known as amazement, astonishment, stupefaction, as well as reverence and admiration. Thus the idea of God is sublime, not beautiful.

Burke goes on at great length to explain what beauty is and what it is not. Some of the things he claims are profound, some are merely silly, as if he cannot really make a distinction between philosophical insights and personal opinions, the hallmark of an amateur in philosophy. First and foremost he points out that beauty speaks directly to the emotions, and thus cold reason has nothing to do with it. This means that any attempts to base it on objective criteria, such as certain proportions, which has been very popular to do, are dead ends. The opposite of beauty is ugliness, not deformity. Ugliness can be consistent with perfect proportions, as well as beauty can ensue without any such. Neither is usefulness any clue. The facial characteristics of a pig are perfectly adapted to its means of living, poking in the ground, but we would never call the face of a pig beautiful. Birds though can appeal to us, even if they to poke in the ground like pigs. Similarly the trunk of an elephant cannot be thought of beautiful, and the monkey, so perfected for its mode of life, belongs to the ugliest creatures in the animal kingdom. It is pronouncements as such, which makes it hard to take Burke very seriously. He then nevertheless tries to give some criteria for beauty, such as subtle variations of form and size, emphasizing their gradualness, changes without any sudden turns and angular features², the same kind of variation in color, and by the same token, smoothness of surface, which he finds for some reason very crucial. More surprising may be his emphasis on diminutiveness, reflecting no doubt his sense of the powerlessness inherent in beauty. He thus goes on to claim that beauty in the human form is much less common in men than in women. In fact one gets the idea that for Burke it can only exist in the fairer sex, and when he goes on to be even more specific, what he really describes is not beauty per se, but his own personal opinion on what he finds sexually attractive in women, namely physical weakness and timidity, sweetness of temperament, and gentleness in emotions and movements. Bashfulness rather than assertiveness, modesty and submissiveness. The fact that those opinions may be conventional, do not make them more objective, just more insipid.

Burke than goes on to explain what beauty is in terms of tactile sensations, where smoothness obviously will play a major role, or as to sound and smells and tastes. Sounds should be gentle and not shrill, as would their gradual variations. Sweetness is more or less identical with beauty when it comes to the tongue. Of course the case of the sublime

¹ Occasionally, but very rarely, I have myself been seized by a more genuine compassion, through what I have heard or seen on the news. In that case my instinct has been to close my eyes and cover my ears.

² One may think of Burke's mature political sensitivity, his abhorrence of the revolution and its radical turns, and his preference for the gradual, piecemeal reform, because reform itself was nothing that he opposed.

becomes much more palatable after those saccharine effusions. Here things should be grand, there should be abrupt changes, and ideas should repeat themselves relentlessly, giving the intimations of infinity, the ultimate sublime concept.

In the final part of the work, he discusses the power of words. In fact nothing can affect the emotions more powerfully than words, and hence he holds that poetry is the highest form of art, more powerful than painting and music. Words interact on three levels. By their sounds, by their representations, and somewhat vaguely the way they affect you. He finds it useful to distinguish three classes of words. We have the aggregate words, such as men, horses, dogs, trees; we have the simple abstract words that refer to simple ideas such as red, square, warm; and then compound abstract words such as justice, liberty, virtue, persuasion, honor. All words have sounds of course, but not all words come with representations, yet of course in the end they all affect us. Especially the compound abstract words, for which people are ready to die, one could add. Burke claims that in an ordinary sentence, there is no time to vividly imagine the representations the words may engender. Donau the river, stemming from the mountainous soil of Germany, entering Austria, passing through the walls of Vienna, abetted by tributaries before entering the lands of the infidels and finally spreading itself into a delta before emptying into the Black Sea. Would be an example of this. Do you really imagine the mountains, the flowing river, the walls of Vienna, the delta at the sea, and the sea itself, asks Burke. I am not sure you do not, obviously it differs from people to people, some having a more vivid visual imagination than others. And even if there is no conscious images floating before the eye, let alone any conscious effort to bring them about, who knows what is going on in the deeper recesses of your mind. Burke goes on to argue, with more conviction this time, that words are more powerful to convey the sublime than mere pictorial representations. In words you cannot only evoke an angel, but also the angel of death. How do you do that by a visual representation? The angel is easy enough, but how to convey that it is an angel of death without resorting to crude and comical symbolism, more likely to make you laugh than feel awe. Finally he makes it clear that there is a distinction between a clear sentence and a strong sentence. The former speaks only to the reasons, while the latter to the emotions. Words allow you not only to present a logical structure, but also to comment on those structures and how you feel about them.

But why do we need the sublime, if we are allowed to ask such a question. Burke responds that just as we need to exercise our muscles to get on with the day, we also need to exercise our intellect. A life spent in total inaction is intolerable, work has to be done, mental as well as physical. What better than tempered terror. A pain that is staged, and hence not directly affecting us, only our intellect. This absence of pain causes he delight, to which we have referred above, and thus the fascination of the spectacle of the sublime, tolerable only when held at a certain distance.

The text is peppered by quotations from contemporary poets as well as the classics, the latter in Greek or Latin. Almost always he misquotes, which reveals that he quotes out of memory not by cheating, as we would be apt to do now. This means that those quotes have meant something to him, enough to make them stick in his memory. Whatever you appropriate and digest, you change and modify, such as your own personal memories.

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