Introduction

The sublime is a massive concept. It has received attention from a range of disciplines, from philosophy and psychology to literature, the arts, and architecture. Its objects have been theorized as equally various, from nature, moral character, and mathematical ideas to expressions in literature, poetry, painting, music, and architecture. Reflections on the concept span history, from classical and eighteenth-century theories through to recent postmodern ideas. More than anything, this broad, deep history is evidence of our enduring interest in the sublime. But it also reveals a notion that, like other 'big' ideas, has perhaps become too broad for its own good, losing its central meaning through its various transformations over the centuries and from treatment by so many different perspectives.

These transformations have, for some, meant that the concept has become too outmoded to be of any significance anymore, relegated to the history of aesthetics (particularly Romanticism), while for others, its more recent transformations have brought it so far from its earlier meaning, celebrated in the eighteenth century, to render it largely unrecognizable.[1] For example, Thomas Weiskel writes that '[t]he infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify. They pique our curiosity, but we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the Romantic sublime, with natural infinitude.'[2]

[1] James Elkins offers a useful discussion in 'Against the Sublime', in Roald Hoffman and Iain Boyd Whyte, eds., *Beyond the Infinite: The Sublime in Art and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75–90. It is also notable that, in attempting to answer Guy Sircello's question of whether or not a theory of the sublime is possible, Jane Forsey answers no. See Forsey, 'Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:4, 2007, 381–389.

[2] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Limits of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 6.

Given the great scope of the sublime, my project here is relatively modest. I seek to reassess, and to some extent reclaim, the meaning of the sublime as developed during its heyday in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory by the likes of Addison, Burke, Kant, and others, and mark out its relevance for contemporary debates in philosophy, especially for aesthetics. Why might such a project be of interest now? It might be argued that the sublime is a relic best left alone, perhaps better replaced with a concept carrying less weighty historical and metaphysical baggage, such as 'awe' or 'grandeur'. Another tack might be to claim that the current, relatively liberal uses of the concept and its more diffuse meanings, especially as postulated by postmodern approaches, are not really a problem, after all. That is, the sublime has simply evolved into a very different kind of being, perhaps for very good reasons.

To a philosopher interested in understanding our aesthetic experiences of nature, art, and the everyday, as well as our use of aesthetic concepts and distinctions between these concepts, both of these arguments strike me as unpersuasive. For one thing, many of us continue to gawp at great things in nature and beyond – the night sky, huge waterfalls, great thunder and lightning storms, wide, deep canyons, skyscrapers, massive dams, and so on. It is not difficult to use the concept meaningfully, still, for a range of things having great size or power, and we can retain some continuity in the objects to which it refers, even if our experiences of sublimity are differently situated today. The edgy, risky feeling of this type of aesthetic response cannot be relegated to landscape tastes of the past, for we continue to seek out incredible, extraordinary places and phenomena – and for many of us, some of them are more accessible than ever before. In other words, the core meaning of the concept and its paradigm cases, as developed in aesthetic theory in the past, still resonate today. If one accepts this, the sublime deserves a fresh look.

This book will develop arguments for this reassessment of the concept in several ways, though with a particular focus. That focus is to address a particular gap in interest in the sublime within the Anglo-American tradition in philosophy. For while it has received recent attention in the Continental tradition, for example, in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, the sublime has largely disappeared from the scene in analytically oriented philosophy, including aesthetics. Beauty once suffered a similar fate, but it is now very much back on the aesthetic agenda. Although the sublime is a less ubiquitous concept compared to beauty, I believe there are good reasons to re-examine it, especially for its contribution to understanding more negatively valenced forms of aesthetic response,

and for the distinctive ways in which imagination and emotion function in response to greatness. In an attempt to distill the core meaning of the sublime for contemporary debates, I shall argue that the natural sublime is especially relevant. The reasons for this will become clear, but they grow out of a range of influential theories from the eighteenth century which largely focused on natural objects and phenomena.

Among these theories, the Kantian sublime stands out as the most philosophically sophisticated and as having the greatest influence in philosophy. It is also a theory that, on most interpretations, focuses on nature widely understood – human and non-human nature. Given emerging work on environmental aesthetics, the sublime is especially relevant for extending and enriching these new discussions. Finally, the natural sublime should also be of particular interest to environmental ethics because of the ways it has been linked to both aesthetic and moral value (via Kant). As I shall argue, the core meaning of the sublime, as tied mainly to nature, presents a form of aesthetic experience which engenders a distinctive aesthetic-moral relationship between humans and the natural environment.

Even though the philosophical approach and aims of this book lean more toward the analytic tradition in modern philosophy, the scope of the topic and my treatment of it ought to find an audience within the Continental tradition as well. In reviving the core meaning of the sublime, my hope is to stir new interest in thinking about the concept with regard to nature. This is something of a departure, as the notion has mainly been applied to art within recent discussions in Continental philosophy and to areas such as literary criticism and art theory. Indeed, in this respect, my approach takes inspiration from the late Ronald Hepburn, who, as a fellow aesthetician interested in the sublime, gracefully bridged the two philosophical traditions through his studies of a range of concepts neglected by aesthetics.[3]

Let me make one further point about the scope of this study. Its parameters are set by the subject matter which motivates its arguments,

[3] See, e.g., Hepburn's 'The Concept of the Sublime: Has It Any Relevance for Philosophy Today?', *Dialectics and Humanism* 1–2, 1988, 137–155; 'Wonder', in *Wonder and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984), 131–154; and *The Reach of the Aesthetic: Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001). Hepburn is also well known for reviving interest in aesthetics of nature with his seminal article 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in *Wonder and Other Essays*, first published in Bernard Williams and Alan Montefiore, eds., *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 285–310.

which is to say that I begin with the sublime as a Western European concept, trace its development mainly in that context, and rehabilitate it within that philosophical framework. While my discussion will resonate for other cultural traditions in philosophy, especially ideas relating to the metaphysical component of sublimity, I will not address how the sublime has been configured or reconfigured within comparative aesthetics, for example, in Asian and South Asian traditions. As I wrote various chapters of this book, it seemed to me as if each one could become a book in itself. So, at least for these reasons, I have had to limit my study to the heart of issues relevant to my main argument rather than pursue what could be a very interesting cross-cultural study of the sublime.

The noun, 'sublime', originates in the Greek noun *hupsos*, or 'height', while its Latin meaning is *sublimis*, or 'elevated', 'uplifted', 'aloft'. Its etymology stems from (probably) *sub*, 'up to', and *limen*, 'lintel'.[4] When the term is attributed to things, it can mean that the thing in question is high or lofty, but it can also mean that the response to certain properties in objects involves a feeling of being elevated or uplifted. The sublime thus involves a relation between the sublime thing and a particular aesthetic experience (or response) in the subject. In this respect, aesthetic judgments of the sublime are like other kinds of aesthetic judgments. Many philosophers would agree that aesthetic judgments are grounded in the subject's response to aesthetic properties and the pleasurable or displeasurable (or mixed) feelings that arise in that response. But the sublime's distinctiveness lies, at least, in the way greatness makes us feel overwhelmed, small, and insignificant in comparison, because we find it so difficult to take in those qualities, while also feeling uplifted. Hence, the sublime seems to be relational in an additional way because of this comparative component, and thematizes the self's relation to something greater. It is this feature that gives way, in many theories, to some kind of metaphysical aspect in the experience. As I proceed, I explore these interesting features of the sublime, including this metaphysical quality.

The first part of this book is mainly historical, with the aim of presenting key theories of the sublime from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and revealing their important contributions to understanding the concept. I extract the sublime's core meaning and paradigm cases, drawing heavily from Kant, and show how the natural sublime became increasingly significant as it formed a central theme of Romanticism. In

[4] 'sublime, adj. and n.'. OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/192766. Accessed 20/3/12.

these chapters, I ask: What constituted the objects of the sublime, and how did nature emerge as its dominant subject matter? How do emotion and imagination function in the sublime? Can the sublime be defended against the claim that it involves self-aggrandizement? How are aesthetic value and moral value related in early theories of the concept? The second part of this book develops the sublime's core meaning and considers its philosophical significance today by engaging it with issues in aesthetics and, also, environmental thought. Questions guiding my analysis include: Can the arts and architecture be sublime? What is distinctive about the sublime as a form of aesthetic value, and how is it to be distinguished from other categories, especially more 'difficult' forms of aesthetic appreciation? What is the relevance of the metaphysical dimension of the sublime today? In what ways is the sublime relevant to valuing the environment, both aesthetically and ethically?

I begin, in the first chapter, by tracing the concept chronologically with respect to its subject matter, qualities, and objects during its heyday in the eighteenth century. My attention is mainly to Britain, where the sublime flourished in particular, and to ideas that preceded discussions on the Continent by Kant and others. The main aim is to show that although the sublime has its roots in literary style and rhetoric reaching back to Longinus, philosophers brought the concept to the fore of aesthetic theory and opened it out to include a range of subject matter, with nature becoming more and more central. The great variety of sublime objects and phenomena are discussed in the theories of several major figures, such as Addison, Gerard, Burke, and Alison. In examining both theoretical and descriptive discourse, I draw out key aspects of the sublime, namely, vastness and power, intense mixed emotions of anxious excitement and astonishment, expanded imagination, and the role of the self in relation to feelings of admiration.

Given the influence of Kant and his deeply philosophical theory of the sublime, I devote two chapters to the subject. In Chapter 2, I discuss a notable influence on Kant's work, Moses Mendelssohn, and then turn to the pre-Critical and Critical phases of Kant's theory, setting out their main ideas and indicating how his theory is both indebted to but also extends beyond the sublime as theorized in Britain. I show that this theory, despite its metaphysical framework, provides a sophisticated philosophical understanding of the concept as a distinctive and meaningful aesthetic category – and one which requires less reconstruction than some of Kant's critics might argue. Following this lead, Chapter 3 addresses a major problem for the enduring significance of Kant's

theory, especially with respect to aesthetic appreciation of nature. Because Kant appears to place more emphasis on the human mind and freedom as sublime, this seems to leave much less room for attributing the sublime to the external world. Rejecting this interpretation, I reassert the centrality of natural objects and phenomena to his theory. With this new interpretation in hand, I show how Kant extends core ideas of the concept into new territory relating to nature and self, with an important propaedeutic role with respect to morality.

Chapter 4 picks up where Kant left off, examining his important influence on two other German philosophers, Schiller and Schopenhauer, and then Kant's legacy in British Romanticism. During the nineteenth century, the sublime attracted less interest in philosophy and aesthetic theory, but it enjoyed an important place in poetry, literature, and the arts, and in the actual experience of landscape. I focus on the Wordsworthian sublime and defend it against the objection that it is ultimately self-regarding, overly humanistic, and 'egotistical'. Drawing on recent interpretations of Wordsworth from the perspective of ecocriticism, I show how the humility and self-awareness of the sublime characterize the human subject as part of nature, where nature is conceived more holistically. This Romantic conception is then located, at the turn of the century, in the more empirical and conservation-conscious sublime of John Muir's nature essays. Overall, these ideas indicate continuity and development of the concept, especially with respect to nature, if not lying squarely within philosophical discussions.

In the second part of this book, Chapters 5 through 8 re-engage philosophical analysis of the sublime by addressing a set of topics which establish its significance for contemporary debates. First, in Chapter 5, I pause to consider what central meaning of the sublime emerges in light of my historical discussion in earlier chapters. This core meaning, outlined in terms of paradigm cases rather than a strict philosophical definition, is explained through natural objects or phenomena having qualities of great height or vastness or tremendous power which cause an intense emotional response characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed and somewhat anxious, though ultimately an experience that feels exciting and pleasurable. With this core meaning in hand, I then consider whether artworks can be sublime in this more 'original sense'. Building upon a position held by some eighteenth-century theorists, including Kant, I argue that the sublime in art is secondary, that is, although artworks can depict, represent, convey, and express the sublime, they cannot be sublime in and of themselves. I support this

argument with a set of reasons relating to size and scale, formlessness, disorder and wildness, physical vulnerability, affect, and the metaphysical quality of the sublime. My discussion considers a range of cases, plus a few exceptions, including some forms of land art and, from architecture, skyscrapers.

The general aim of Chapters 6 and 7 is to distinguish the sublime from neighbouring aesthetic categories and to carefully position it relative to them, in order to show why it is still a distinctive aesthetic concept. More specifically, I argue that the sublime belongs to a set of categories which identify more difficult forms of aesthetic appreciation, in contrast to what might be called 'easy beauty'. In Chapter 6, I address a familiar pairing from the history of aesthetics, the sublime and tragedy; however, by bringing in a discussion of the natural sublime, I give this pairing a modern twist. Through an analysis and comparison of the 'paradox of tragedy' and the 'paradox of the sublime', I demonstrate how each can illuminate the other and pave the way to resolving both. I argue that, in fact, these paradoxes can be explained away if we recognize the complexity and value of more negative forms of aesthetic experience, through the exercise of 'negative emotions' and their edifying effects. Chapter 7 positions the sublime with respect to 'grandeur', 'terrible beauty', and 'ugliness'. I build upon distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful by considering the relationship of the sublime to grandeur as an adjacent concept that is more positively valenced, and I argue that experiences of grandeur lack the more mixed 'negative pleasure' of the sublime. Turning to the more negative concepts of terrible beauty and ugliness, I show that the sublime, while sharing something with them, is distinguished at least by its greatness in terms of both scale and power. My argument for the value of more difficult forms of aesthetic appreciation is given additional support by showing how they expand and enrich our aesthetic interactions through uneasy – yet meaningful – relationships with the natural world.

Given the rise of philosophical study on the environment in environmental aesthetics and ethics, it is a logical step from reclaiming the natural sublime of the eighteenth century to considering its relevance to discussions about the natural environment today. Chapter 8 thus completes my argument for the relevance of the sublime to contemporary philosophy and solidifies my position that the main territory of the sublime is the natural world. To carve out a new, environmental, sublime, I defend the concept against claims that it is historically outmoded, metaphysically suspect, and anthropocentric, drawing to some extent

on arguments from preceding chapters. In particular, I point to ways in which this more challenging, yet exciting, form of aesthetic appreciation feeds into a distinctive kind of aesthetic-moral relationship with the environment. This type of appreciation is deeply comparative, as we feel insignificant, humbled by the greatness of nature rather than masterful over it. The admiration we feel in the sublime, as well as a perspectival shift of self, can feed into new forms of self-knowledge and potentially ground respect for nature, not in spite of, but very much because of nature's irresistible scale and power.

Our opportunities for experiencing sublimity are not common, yet not rare either. Ranging from the amazing panorama of space on a clear night to the rarer occurrence of seeing the magnificent full breach of a great humpback whale, the extraordinary character of these experiences explains the sublime's singular effect. Our astonishment, felt through a distinctive type of aesthetic response, is no small matter, deserving careful consideration for locating a new role for the sublime as a concept with aesthetic and moral significance for contemporary times.

PART I

THE HISTORICAL SUBLIME