

Robert Doran. *The Theory of the Sublime: From Longinus to Kant.* Cambridge University Press 2015. 328 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107101531).

The sublime has long been a topic of fascination to scholars but also of puzzlement. While it has inspired intense interest in some, the vast majority of academics have tended to neglect it. Part of the problem is that the topic has no clear home and does not fit neatly into any category or discipline. It is a literary, aesthetic, and rhetorical concept, but also a moral one (especially in the philosophy of Kant). Another reason for the relative neglect of the sublime is its quasi-religious nature: it is connected with the feelings of awe, wonder, mystery, transcendence, and the infinite, and as such no doubt causes many scholars to avoid it, given their reluctance to address topics that border on the mystical or religious. By its nature, the sublime is exceedingly difficult to define precisely, another obstacle to scholars taking an interest in this subject. This is a shame, as the sublime is an extremely important topic, historically, culturally, and philosophically.

Robert Doran's new book provides a much-needed systematic, detailed and comprehensive survey of the idea of the sublime, tracing it from its origin in the obscure third century work attributed to Longinus, through its major expositors in the modern era, including Boileau, Dennis, Burke, and especially Kant, who gets the most detailed treatment. This work is a welcome addition to the limited literature on the sublime; any student of the subject will profit from Doran's intelligent and well-informed inquiry into the subject. Doran's background is in French literature and literary theory, with previous works that include a study of Rene Girard (thankfully, Girard's goofy theory of 'mimetic rivalry' does not make it into this treatise on the sublime, apart from a single footnote, and philosophers will be happy to know there is very little of contemporary literary theory in the book). The work is philosophically sophisticated, and Doran has relied on experts in the field to make sure his account is accurate, including Allen Wood's oversight on the chapters on Kant.

Doran's work is not merely a historical account of the development of the idea of the sublime, though it is that as well. The author also develops his own original interpretations and enters into the debate about the meaning and significance of the concept. One issue that has long haunted discussion of the sublime is whether it is primarily merely a rhetorical concept. Longinus' original treatise on the sublime can be and often has been interpreted as a handbook on rhetoric and public speaking. On this view, the sublime is nothing more than a kind of style: the grand, elevated language appropriate for certain important subjects. This approach has often led to a kind of dismissal of the idea of the sublime as merely a practical tool for speakers but not a serious philosophical subject in its own right. Doran convincingly demonstrates that this constricted view of the sublime cannot be right, even in Longinus, for whom the capacity to express the sublime is an indication of a higher quality of mind. That is, it has a deep moral significance. Even in Longinus, Doran finds evidence that the sublime is a matter not merely of rhetoric but of something approaching religious experience.

Doran's central thesis is that the sublime represents a form of 'secular transcendence,' a modern substitute for the excess supernaturalism of religion. Calling it 'modern' may sound odd given that the concept dates back to the third century. However, even in the third century there is evidence of a strong secular, humanistic movement in reaction against the mystery religions. And of course the sublime as a concept only came into its own in the modern era, and as such served as a critical concept in the age of science, when the yearning for transcendence required a new outlet given the attacks on religion. The sublime also became a crucial element in the Romantic movement, a response to the bourgeois ethic and to the increasing commercialization and secularization of society.

Doran also claims, though this thesis is not well-developed, that the sublime played a crucial role in the development of ‘modern subjectivity’ (4).

The concept of ‘transcendence’ is difficult to define and is widely overused, so that its meaning has become ever more fuzzy and New Agey. One weakness in Doran’s book is his failure to provide a careful definition of this key idea, central as it is to his thesis. Relegating this issue to a footnote, Doran does not use his best judgment in relying on www.thefreedictionary.com to provide a definition of this crucial term: ‘the state of excelling or surpassing or going beyond usual limits’ (Doran 27). This definition, while not exactly wrong, is not particularly helpful either. What are the ‘usual limits’? By this definition, eating too much at dinner would count as transcendence. In fairness of course, the concept of transcendence in the religious/mystical sense is precisely one of those concepts that is practically impossible to define; indeed, in the case of ‘transcendence,’ almost by definition. Still, the book needed to give substantially more attention to this issue, given its importance.

But this is a fairly minor complaint. Anyone interested in the topic of the sublime will find something useful in this book. It is accessible to those who have little background in the subject, but also an original contribution even for those who are experts. Doran’s approach is to provide a detailed, careful examination of the particular approaches of each of the major thinkers on this topic (fortunately for this approach, there have only been a handful of major thinkers on the sublime). Thus a good half of the book—six of the twelve chapters—deals with Kant’s approach to the sublime. And here Doran shows just how central the concept of the sublime is in Kantian philosophy—and not just in the third Critique, but throughout the entire corpus of Kant’s work. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that Kant’s philosophical outlook is defined by the sublime, by the idea that the human being is special in its capacity to transcend ordinary limits and thus escape the constraints of empiricist philosophy and the new mechanistic scientific outlook. Indeed, it is arguably in ethics rather than aesthetics that the sublime is most important in Kantian philosophy; the human capacity to pursue moral ideals even against self-interest or life itself is for Kant key evidence of a set of values that transcend nature.

Doran also attempts a more socio-political interpretation of the importance of the sublime. He suggests that it can be interpreted in part as a product of the rise of the bourgeoisie as a class in modern culture, and the decline of the nobility as a class. The sublime functions, in Doran’s view, as the ‘site of a bourgeois appropriation of the heroic ethos of the old nobility, negating it on the level of class while preserving it and affirming it on the affective-dispositional level’ (288). This sociocultural explanation is less well developed in Doran’s book, and it does not fit well with his main thesis, that the sublime serves as a secular form of transcendence. Is the sublime merely a cynical attempt by the rising bourgeoisie to legitimate itself, or is it a genuine vehicle of transcendence, a new secular form of religion? In my view, Doran makes a far more convincing case for the latter position, and for the philosophical importance of the concept of the sublime as an object of continuing scholarly investigation.

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