

The Counter-Feeling of Freedom

Kant on Passivity, Humiliation and the Power of Pure Practical Reason

In this talk, I discuss the coexistence between passive states and the spontaneity of freedom in Kant's account of the sublime in the third *Critique*. My aim is to show that passive states – and the related humiliation of the imagination – are the conditions of possibility for pure practical reason to display the full extent of its power and let the subject feel the unconditioned elevation of the moral vocation of the human being above the domain of nature.

I argue that the experience of the sublime relies on a specific kind of unity between receptivity and spontaneity, whereby passivity can be said to turn itself into activity. Instead of assuming the dualism of human nature as a given and unquestioned premise, I claim that Kant's concern is to show that human nature must be properly conceived of in terms of a unitary whole. The passive status of receptivity is not to be taken as a problem to be solved by appealing to the spontaneity of freedom, but rather as something playing a positive role. The inability of the imagination – namely its failure and the following humiliation – to representatively grasp both the mathematical magnitude and the dynamic impetuosity of the structures and forces of nature is a first-order feeling working as the condition of possibility for a second-order feeling. This is why Kant calls the pleasure following from the feeling of the sublime “indirect”. While – on the one hand – the first-order feeling concerns the limits of our cognitive faculties, at the same time it also works – on the other hand – as a spark igniting the activation of pure practical reason and the unconditioned causality of freedom.

The idea is that both feelings – the negative (direct) and the positive (indirect) – involve both passive and active states. In the former case, being receptive towards the powers of nature also means activating pure practical reason. In the latter case, the unconditioned spontaneity of freedom makes the subject feel – receptively – the moral vocation of human nature.