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### The Philosophic Significance of the Sublime

In this paper I will be interpreting the sublime as a phenomenon in which phenomenal existence becomes self-defining. I wish to suggest that this phenomenon may be crucial in alerting one to phenomenal existence both as originating and as resolving what is thematically at issue in a reflective life. In fact the phenomenon itself seems to me to embody a fundamental philosophical orientation: a radical commitment to things and persons in a standing which we may come to share with them--in phenomenal existence.

Whatever can speak decisively to our condition tends to address us as sublime. This may be what is made manifest in human articulation: in the doing and comportment and bearing and speech and work of men. And it may be in the address of nature. But whatever so addresses us elicits our respect and our commitment with respect to it. It commits us to foster, to sustain and support, to stand by, to care for what so appears as warranting our commitment; and it sets us on our way. Nor can we invent or concoct or devise or ordain or stipulate anything that will effectively establish itself as speaking decisively to our condition. It may be even in spite of ourselves, and often without premonition of what is coming, that we are so addressed. Yet it also seems we must be ready, in that to one who is not in readiness--with whom things have not matured to the point--nothing decisive can happen. Thus the questioning mind and heart of Buddha and of Job intertwine with all that enters into the actual occasion; they are necessarily implicated in the occurrence answering to a questioning mind and heart. Again, the sublime as reflected in Camus' "Retour à Tipasa" comes clear

out of that implacable assumption of the human condition which we know to have been his.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon of the sublime is our being born into mature human estate, which one can only knowingly enter upon. Though we seem susceptible to birth again and again, and relative to the phases of life upon which we enter, yet it is always the one and same life which we inherit anew. And it is the one and same world in which the things of the world and our fellows are discovered anew. The sublime establishes unequivocally the vocational character of this life--as the very basis of its unity and sameness. And it establishes the things of the world as belonging forever and evermore to the actual occasion of creation.

None of this happens, or could happen, as a matter of course--or in the mode of taking things for granted. It can only happen in the course of existence in which we are responsibly engaged with things and one another. The sublime strikes through all comfort, complacency, triviality, posturing, moralism, banality, prestige, and prejudice, in the rousing and sustaining of an original and unique human being. And how does it sustain? By disclosing and confirming the possibility of constancy in the course of what phenomenal existence may bring. I believe it is accordingly that Spinoza is led to conceive the chief good in terms of character, and then defines the character in question as "knowledge of the union existing between the mind and the whole of nature." For that to be a real knowing, the sublime and everyday existence would have to become contrapuntally and dialectically inseparable. Yet the vein of that knowing would also seem quite matter-of-fact. Simplicity is the style of the sublime.<sup>2</sup>

Spinoza reflects the transfiguration of human character in the sublime through his conception of what is familiarly called 'virtue': "Blessedness is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself." And here, as the last "proposition" of the Ethics goes on to say, is the root of genuine self-control. In the

concluding "note" to this proposition, Spinoza loosens up with his meaning in the simplest terms: he is talking of our basic potency or power of action, as conjoined with a certain wittingness of ourselves and things; this wittingness and conjoint power of action are in contrast with that mode of life in which men are driven and distracted, in which inadvertency reigns; between the two the issue lies as to whether or not "the true acquiescence" of our "spirit" may ensue.

Certainly the phenomenon with which Spinoza's thought culminates is not peculiar to him, however difficult and rare it may be to live and think by its guidance. With the theme of the true acquiescence of our spirit through a certain wittingness of ourselves and of things--conjoined with our power of action--his thought converges with major traditions of Oriental thought, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist, which in their respective ways also reflect the phenomenon of the sublime, and interpret it, too, in intimate connection with everyday existence, and with unsurpassed dialectical presence of mind. Something like the true acquiescence of our spirit of which Spinoza speaks seems to be definitive for our response in the phenomenon of the sublime. The rendering of interest both deeper and disinterested, the enfranchisement and sublimation of feeling and wanting, the losing of oneself in which one becomes oneself: these often and rightly recognized features of response upon the sublime seem to be in function of a still more basic consummation of truth in the phenomenon. A certain wittingness of ourselves and of things--as together, and conjoined with our power of action--that wittingness jells, elusively yet as palpably, in the very acquiescence of spirit.

In connection with this point, which is central for interpreting the philosophical significance of the sublime, I am going to quote the third section of the last chapter of Whitehead's Adventures of Ideas. He is speaking of what he calls "Peace," and his testimony seems both plain and precise:

The peace that is here meant is not the negative conception of anesthesia. It is a positive feeling which crowns the 'life

and motion' of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future, nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, unverbally and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself. Thus Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality. There is an inversion of relative values. It is primarily a trust in the efficacy of Beauty. It is a sense that fineness of achievement is as it were a key unlocking treasures that the narrow nature of things would keep remote. There is thus involved a grasp of infinitude, an appeal beyond boundaries. Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. The trust in the self-justification of Beauty introduces faith, where reason fails to reveal the details.

The experience of Peace is largely beyond the control of purpose. It comes as a gift. The deliberate aim at Peace very easily passes into its bastard substitute, Anesthesia. In other words, in the place of a quality of 'life and motion,' there is substituted their destruction. Thus Peace is the removal of inhibition and not its introduction. It results in a wider sweep of conscious interest. It enlarges the field of attention. Thus Peace is self-control at its widest--at the width where the 'self' has been lost, and interest has been transferred to coordinations wider than personality. Here the real motive interests of the spirit are meant, and not the superficial play of discursive ideas. Peace is helped by such superficial width, and also promotes it. In fact it is largely for this reason that Peace is so essential for civilization. It is the barrier against narrowness. One of its fruits is that passion whose existence Hume denied, the love of mankind as such.

Interpreting as we must the pivotal moment of unverbally insight in the sublime, may we not discern in it that guiding intuition in Whitehead's own thinking which led him to protest against the notion of vacuous actuality (the "narrow nature of things" mentioned above) and against misplaced concreteness? Positively construed, this intuition seems to place his reflective concern in events, in actual occasions as they come to pass. There is a significant grasp, not of entities thought of as 'in-themselves,' but of things and ourselves as co-ingredient in a dynamic order of concrescence, in the flow of a common existence. Trust in the efficacy of beauty could only be engendered and borne out in concrete existence calling for that trust. Beauty seems possible without that

trust, but not the sublime. Perhaps something like this distinction, incidentally, matches with Plato's conception to the effect that philosophic appreciation of beauty carries us into a transcendent beauty, embracing all that leads us that way, and transmuting the beautiful as a manifold, as in a decisive chord.

I have taken Whitehead's passage on "Peace," along with the parallel theme of blessedness in Spinoza's thought, to locate within the phenomenon of the sublime a crucial element of philosophical orientation underlying its import for human character. I would now speak of the element of orientation in question as witnessing of ourselves and things--together--in the mode of finality.

That is to say, in the phenomenon of the sublime we are decisively caught up in destinate existence with one another and with things--as belonging together, existing in a mutuality that is final and ultimate. It is in and out of that mutuality appreciated as final and ultimate that we can affirm things and other persons in their independence, and also at the same time--reflexively--ourselves. This affirmation is respect. And perhaps there is no more telling point of initiation for reflection on phenomenal existence than this: respect for what offers itself and self-respect are inseparable, in a common standing. The phenomenon is two-fold. It is at once referential and reflexive, reflexive and referential. This bipolarity, if you will, obtains within the one order of existence. But if we incline in an habitual way to think that bipolarity referentially, as if it would lend itself to representational judgment--instead of its requiring reflective judgment, then, precisely, we are going to miss the philosophical significance of the sublime. We will end up reifying things and selves--as 'in themselves.' And representational judgment will rule our reflection in the stead of an appreciation carried out reflectively that all representation, and the status of 'entity vis-à-vis representation,' arise within phenomenal existence in function of it, and not the other way around.

Phenomenal existence is thematic for reflection and interpretative activity. It is not subject-matter for description. There can be no reflective reckoning with it that does not at bottom implicate the man--as a man, who is attempting to render the account. His thought will necessarily be expressed with the force of testimony and witnessing to meaning as he finds it in phenomenal existence and as he is able to resolve himself on such meaning, even if that should be only the yield of his fixation in a privative mode of phenomenal existence as the order of occurrent meaning.

A supreme lawfulness seems to reign in phenomenal existence, quite as unobtrusively as it does ineluctably. This lawfulness pertains to us as active beings who are intent, but it pertains to us as bound up with things in phenomenal existence as order of occurrent meaning: it is a karmic lawfulness in both senses. Let me try to come at it at least obliquely as follows.

Our situation is radically permissive (like the Tar Baby!) in the sense that it is radically silent on 'the subject'--if what is at issue in it be taken as a subject matter, considered in abstraction from our involvement in it. When the saint, Narada, seemed on the point of breaking out of karmic existence, praying to Vishnu that he might be done with it and that Vishnu might only reveal to him the "secret of Vishnu's Maya," into the waters of that existence he was simply plunged again, where the issue has nothing to do with any secret--the sort of matter about which one might become informed.<sup>3</sup> When Job cries out for understanding in his affliction, the response speaking to his condition is simply in the terms of the things of this world, in an appeal to a certain wittingness of himself with them. If he is illuminated, it is hardly by reason of having been informed. There is only complete silence on the question as to any possible instituted correlation between a man's actions and his lot. Yet--if the terms of such a question are not met, and silence prevails in the very contingencies falling

to our lot, are we not left to meditate something gropingly more relevant in Job's questioning that is met in the culminating event? We might call it the tension between his sense of justice and his sense of existence: it is this tension which seems resolved. Nothing could really speak to his condition--or ours, without reconciling these two, granted that in the event the effective reconciliation is also a transfiguration of each. What holds up is creation, and in the discovery of creation faith is refined, deepened, and renewed. Now creation is self-defining phenomenal existence, that very existence coming clear in its essential character. Its lawfulness is clarified in faith. And the story seems something like this: as we take things, so we have them; and if we take them in faith, we have them in earnest; if wishfully--then fantastically; if wilfully, then stubbornly; if merely objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity--then emptily; and if in faith, though it be in suffering, yet we have them in earnest, and it is really them that we have. That is, the order of occurrent meaning in which we are placed with them is one in which we may find our place with them, and in so doing place ourselves. It is that of a mutual existence, demanding on our part to be lived as such, and quite as 'systematic' in illusion in so far as it is not so lived, as it would be in so far as it may come to enlightenment. The extremes marking the issue of phenomenal existence are these: as between the character of a destiny that is ours to fulfill, and that of a fate that takes us.

Actually, our participation in phenomenal existence with things and one another seems for the most part fraught with ambiguity. In the sublime the ambiguities of existence are not blinked or removed. They open up in possibility even in the actual occasion in which they are decisively resolved. And they are so resolved that we resolutely grasp and make our pact with the impossibility of guarantee or security in coping with them. One way or another, whether wittingly and willingly or no, every man is taking his life in his hands in an existence

co-articulated with everything that comes his way. This is our condition, of which we said at the start: "Whatever can speak decisively to our condition tends to address us as sublime." But what is sovereign belongs to the event in which our mutuality with things and one another both underwrites respective independence and dissolves illusory separation. Then we in our intentionality discover what we have really been intent upon: that is nothing other than our union with one another and the whole of nature, now wittingly assumed. This union, brought to acknowledgment and affirmation, is the properly sublime. It is that of self-defining phenomenal existence.

For reflective life the event is epochal indeed in a broadly Husserlian sense. It is something of a disclosure to reflective thought of its own peculiar character, namely that we are called upon to think thematically in the grip of occurrent meaning in the events of a mutual existence, and not to credit our representations with any finality. The sublime suggests that we need not be taken in by our abstractions, and that philosophic reflection may help in this; and without undermining the relevance of representation at all--as a mode of thought in function of phenomenal existence.

It is well while looking at rocks to have the roar of a river in one's ears. Or to see still-standing trees through falling snow.

#### References

1. Albert Camus, L'Ete. Paris: Gallimard, 1954
2. This sentence echoes--but simplifies in statement--a remark of Kant's. For his remark see Kant's Critique of Judgment, Bernard translation, (London: Macmillan, 1931), p. 145.
3. See Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization, (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1946), pp. 27-33. I read the story of Narada with some difference from Zimmer.