



A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful

Edmund Burke

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A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime & Beautiful is a 1757 treatise by Edmund Burke. It attracted the attention of such as Diderot & Kant. According to Burke, the Beautiful is what is well-formed & esthetically pleasing, whereas the Sublime is what has the power to compel & destroy. The preference for the Sublime over the Beautiful was to mark the transition from the Neoclassical to the Romantic era.

For Burke, the origins of ideas of the beautiful & the sublime can be understood by means of causal structures. According to Aristotelian physics & metaphysics, causation can be divided into formal, material, efficient & final causes. The formal cause of beauty is the passion of love; the material cause concerns aspects of certain objects such as smallness, smoothness, delicacy etc.; the efficient cause is the calming of our nerves; the final cause is God's providence. What is most peculiarly original to Burke's view of beauty is that it cannot be understood by the traditional bases of beauty: proportion, fitness or perfection. The sublime also has a causal structure that is unlike that of beauty. Its formal cause is the passion of fear (especially of death); the material cause is equally aspects of certain objects such as vastness, infinity, magnificence etc.; its efficient cause is the tension of our nerves; the final cause is God having created & battled Satan, as expressed in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Burke's was the 1st complete philosophical exposition for separating the beautiful & the sublime into their own respective rational categories.

A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful Details

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J. Alfred says

Not something I'd read for fun, but I think I'm smarter for having finished it. It is a solid philosophical inquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, as you may have been able to guess from its title. It is apparently a foundational text for the aesthetics of the Romantics, and apparently Burke (who knows at least four languages) wrote it when he was nineteen, so if you want to feel like your life is passing you by, this is a good one.

Ashley says

An interesting look at what evokes emotions in viewers. Not a riveting read, but interesting if you wanted to write a book/make a movie.

Sophie says

La recherche philosophique est une lecture intéressante pour ce qui traite du sublime et du beau, ou de l'esthétique en général. Elle m'a été très utile dans mes recherches pour ma maîtrise, mais bien que de nombreux points abordés par Burke m'éclairent sincèrement, son argumentation basée sur la Providence me laisse quelque peu froide (surtout en la comparant à celle que fait Kant dans sa Critique de la faculté de juger). L'argumentation est toutefois limpide, bien présentée, et fort divertissante. C'est une lecture de philo qui peut intéresser un large public, même si non initié au genre (comme moi).

Relu 1 fois.

John Kulm says

I didn't completely agree with the ideas in this book, but I rate it five stars because it made me think and it showed me ways of seeing that I didn't notice before. He must have been quite the extrovert personality type, because he entirely associated the sublime and beautiful with external objects – things for the five senses - and he said nothing about beauty being in the eye of the beholder.

Burke mainly equates the sublime with “terror,” and contrasts it with beauty which he equates with things that inspire us to love. I can remember a time when love woke me up psychologically. When love failed to continue, the sublime aspects of my anguish continued to wake me up psychologically. So, both ends of the spectrum should be embraced: beauty and love versus the sublime, terror, fear, anguish, impressiveness.

This is where I felt disagreement, because every time he associated the sublime with terror, I wanted to remind myself that sublime is also associated with other things like being impressed, amazed, awe-struck, and even anguished. There is a terror-association in all those, but there's a problem with contrasting terror

with beauty: The contrast makes us want to avoid the sublime. Modern thought contrasts love with fear, and encourages us to avoid fear, but if we contrast love-as-beauty with terror-as-sublimity, we can see that the sublime has a wonderful place. Burke writes about such things as the awesome-ness of mountains and the darkness of heavy forests as being sublime and terror-striking. There's wonder in this, and it's heaps more interesting than the modern tendency to avoid fear in favor of love.

“Beauty” is what made me want to read this book, because I wanted to get a clue about what poets and artists mean when they speak so highly of beauty, and... okay, I get it now.

I also understand now, from this book, that being awake psychologically can come from beauty – being in love – as much as from the sublime, being anguished and impressed-upon. Although that wasn't Burke's purpose in writing it, that's what I got from the book.

Here are some quotes from *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*:

“Sympathy: It is by the first of these passions that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected; so that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime. ... It is by this principle chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself.”

“On closing this general view of beauty, it naturally occurs, that we should compare it with the sublime; and in this comparison there appears a remarkable contrast. For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure.”

“I have before observed, that whatever is qualified to cause terror, is a foundation capable of the sublime; to which I add, that not only these, but many things from which we cannot probably apprehend any danger have a similar effect, because they operate in a similar manner. I observed too, that whatever produces pleasure, is fit to have beauty engrafted on it.”

Nick says

Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh whaaaaaaaaaaaat?

This was supposed to be a book about aesthetics, but it ended up being a book about Edmund Burke's own little deeply subjective analysis of his own aesthetic tastes and preferences. Its amazing how little in this can be universalized and yet how confidently it is presented as though he's discussing physics, or even ethics.

DID YOU KNOW that smooth objects are inherently more beautiful than rough objects? Don't tell the

Japanese! Did you know that sharp angles are not as beautiful as curves? Did you know that dark skin isn't as beautiful as light skin? Whoops!

Yeah, lots of stuff like that in here. Random intuitive leaps about what beauty consists of which seem grossly out of step with what we currently think. Also he makes up a bunch of divisions like "the sublime" and some other distinctions like the horrifying or something. Obviously those are real distinctions, but somewhat arbitrary ones, which is not how he treats them.

Sean Chick says

I found the eighteenth century prose a little more turgid than usual although Burke has some good ideas here. Its better than the bitter conservative drivel he later dished out.

Bill Kerwin says

An interesting early essay by the father of modern conservatism on the sublime and beautiful and how they differ. Thoughtful and occasionally entertaining. The 18th century prose--like most 18th century prose--is excellent.

Emily says

The question with this kind of book is: what can the contemporary reader get out of it? If you are looking for a book that will actually tell you something about the nature of beauty and sublimity, you'll probably find Burke's argument to be dated, strange, somewhat irrelevant, and sometimes unintentionally funny. The best way to approach this book is as a historical document. The *Enquiry* was an incredibly influential book in British and American aesthetic thought and is probably best studied in that light (although it fell out of favor for a long time. The reason why we have such a proliferation of new editions is scholars' renewed interest in it over the past 30 or 40 years.)

Burke's main argument can be summed up thus:

beauty = smoothness, paleness, symmetry, smallness, gentle curves, etc. (clearly he's deriving this from the pale, curvy ideal of womanhood in mid-18th century Britain)

sublimity = huge/immeasurable, infinite, dangerous, dark/obscure, loud (think of the stormy ocean or a chasm in the Alps--preferably viewed from a place of safety)

This argument is important because it locates the qualities of sublimity and beauty *in things themselves*. That is, a vase is beautiful because it physically embodies these particular qualities. The rival school of thought held that beauty is not located in the vase itself, but arises when I perceive it. What Burke has to say about beauty and sublimity per se is probably not very interesting to us, but his *way of thinking about it*--that is, his answer to the question of whether or not aesthetic qualities inhere in objects--is still very relevant.

David says

As important as John Locke is to philosophy, his influence is sure to lead to the production of books like Burke's work on aesthetics. The reader is warned early at least. Burke proposes to outline aesthetics in scientific fashion because he truly believes its components must fall into line as the dictates of Reason do. *cringe* Just as Locke believed morality and ethics would be broken down into perfectly mapped out sciences if we just stopped and properly defined our "clear and distinct terms," Burke proceeds to catalog the aesthetic buzzwords that we can't go without. Look, Locke's moral science didn't happen. So this ain't happening either. Think Hume's book on morality. You're not getting any philosophical enquiry. You're getting a handbook.

Kant's treatment of the sublime in Critique of Judgment makes any of Burke's attempt on the same useless (no big shame, it is Kant, I guess). Burke's idea of beauty runs like a checklist. He only looks at constituents and comments hardly at all on the integration of those parts. Barely anything on the subjective either which is ridiculous in aesthetics...he acknowledges only subjective "sensibility" which is just degree of awareness of the checklist items. The work never goes any deeper. The reader can only hope to hit upon a departure point for his or her own aesthetic reflections at best.

Joe says

As evident from the title of the book, Burke questions and interprets the Sublime and Beautiful. Namely, how it affects the individual, and possible reasons for the consequent feelings. This latter point, in my opinion, is where Burke starts to think much more as Psychologist, and begins to link the mind-body relationship; for him, they are greatly connected.

Part One begins with Burke highlighting the Novelty of life, its decline through life, and the inability for mere Novelty to excite the mind: "In short, the occurrences of life, by the time we come to know it a little, would be incapable of affecting the mind with any other sensations than those of loathing and weariness, if many things were not adapted to affect the mind by means of other powers besides novelty in them, and of other passions besides curiosity in ourselves."

This is followed by his presenting of Pain and Pleasure, not as a spectrum, but as both individual spectrums both with 'indifference' as the neutral point. Burke defines indifference as the "state neither of pain or pleasure".

This continues throughout Part 1, with multiple examples such as Joy and grief. One particular example, which I believe is where he first introduces a 'psychological' aspect, is his understanding that passions which concern self-preservation rely on pain or danger. This includes ideas of pain, sickness and death. This is contracted by the small affect that "life" and "health" have on the individual. This latter idea initialises his ideas of "The Sublime"; huge, immeasurable, infinite, dangerous, dark/obscure, loud.

A mention is made of his other 'passion' category: Society. In short, it is the passions arising from gratifications and pleasure. This contrasts self-preservation, which arises from pain and danger. I will not talk any more about this as I believe it was just Burke's way of creating a 'universal' idea.

Part Two focus on the idea of the Sublime. The prerequisites, previously mentioned, are explained in this chapter. Astonishment, he thinks, is "the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect". Although he doesn't actually directly tackle astonishment, he attributes it to factors such as Privation of darkness, solitude and silence. This lack of, which Burke recognises to cause obscurity, is a key factor in the feeling of the Sublime. The thought of obscurity also plays a vital role in

Beauty; but in this case, it is the completeness.

A particular prerequisite for the Sublime, which I feel is perhaps one of the most important; Kant will agree, is the idea of Vastness: “Greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime. This is followed by the idea of Infinity: “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.[...] But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure.”

Part Three outlines the idea of Beauty. In broadest terms, the essentials are: smoothness, paleness, symmetry, smallness, and gentle curves.

Interestingly, he disagreed with the notion of proportions being a cause of beauty. Using somewhat strange metaphors, such as the proportions seen in vegetables and different species of Birds, he presents that we [humans] do not find universal proportions beautiful, and that they differ with everything we see. Burke also disagrees that the fitness (adaptability) of an animal causes it to be seen as beautiful. He presents his rationale by giving examples such as the swine.

Having moved away from these factors, he focuses on properties of the object. This is important as he locates the qualities of beauty in the things themselves, rather than the object is beautiful because the perceiver views it to be.

One particular example for the effect of Gradual variation on Beauty: “Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness, the softness, the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?”

Part Four is where Burke truly blossoms. Before, he had given ‘needs’ for the sublime and beautiful, but had better explained what the causes were, and the reasons why.

Some excerpts from this section:

Why visual objects of great dimensions are sublime:

“Vision is performed by having a picture, formed by the rays of light which are reflected from the object, painted in one piece, instantaneously, on the retina, or last nervous part of the eye.[...] all the light reflected from a large body should strike the eye in one instant; yet we must suppose that the body itself is formed of a vast number of distinct points, every one of which, or the ray from every one, makes an impression on the retina. So that, though the image of one point should cause but a small tension of this membrane, another, and another, and another stroke, must in their progress cause a very great one, until it arrives at last to the highest degree; and the whole capacity of the eye, vibrating in all its parts, must approach near to the nature of what causes pain, and consequently must produce an idea of the sublime.”

Similar logic to the above is used in the creation of Sublime through the repetition of noise.

My opinions on Burke’s work

I can definitely see why he is an important figure in the development of the Aesthetic, particularly the idea of the Sublime and Beautiful. His somewhat psychological development into the reasons of the feelings we encounter definitely made it in an interesting read. For example, his mentioning of how things beautiful have the ability to decrease an individual’s nerves foreshadows what we now know from Neuroscience.

Having read a bit of Kant’s book on the Sublime, and he greatly focuses on the ‘greatness’ and ‘infinite’, which I too, believe are the best sections of this book.

I recommend this book to anyone who wants to know about the development of the Aesthetic, and/or has an interest in the Romantic notion of feelings and how nature, normally, affects Humans.

Mehmed says

Some words that come to mind when describing this book are: eloquent, overwhelming, thought-provoking, confusing, and "what have I just read?" On face value, the author seems to be merely defining and distinguishing the words, beautiful and sublime. The title is pretty self-explanatory and the book does what one would anticipate from it. But well into the book, it becomes clear that there must be a larger plot. Edmund Burke lays out our role in society and the way our passions work as in a congruence with the divine insertion of the innate capacity to perceive beauty and to be drawn to the Sublime - which is defined as a terrifying, awe-inspiring notion. The sublime is an experience that is so beyond the experience of the mundane 'beautiful' that it carries us away from the world of images and clarities to the world of feelings and intense emotions. Burke shows that our pleasures for what is beautiful (worldly) cannot come near the "delight" felt by the sublime (unworldly), Godly experience... The book has made me contemplate the standards of my taste and made me question the nature of my relationship to the most sublime being, God.

Fabrício Tavares De Moraes says

Investigaçāo minuciosa e rigorosa sobre a fisiologia da percepçāo estética.

Chris brown says

If you are into philosophy enough to find this obscure book on your own then you probably would be better off not reading it. It is a very well written, very well thought out work, but at points can be extremely repetitive and short. There are sections where you would hope that Burke would go into vast detail but he only offer a paragraph or two while there are sections that continue on for pages leaving you to question, "why?"

At times i also found Burke sounding as if he was giving a scientific report on things that in truth can not now nor have ever been able to be comprehended by science let alone measured.

I found part five, which dealt with the words very thought intriguing, it however was not worth reading through the other four to obtain. Part two section two on terror highly quotable as well as all of Part one.

Overall I would say if you do find this book and would like to give it a go, Read part one then skip to part five and rest your worry because you are not missing anything.

Annie says

The Sublime!

The Literary Chick says

An elegant work that expresses in words feelings and emotions that you knew but could never quite articulate.
