

Research on the Sublime Concept in the Pre-critical Period of Kant

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Abstract—In the pre-critical period, Kant's understanding of sublime is different from Critique of Judgment. First, under the influence of predecessors, Kant understands the sublime as empirical psychological feelings, and takes natural landscape, gender characteristics of men and women as the realistic source of inspiring sublime feelings; second, Kant takes the "providence" of external empirical facts, such as universal moral principle and "the purpose of nature" as the sublime transcendental basis. Kant does not have a self-consistent analysis of sublime in this period as manifested in the absence of a provision of pure epistemological significance for sublime transcendence, and even in the swing between whether man is natural purpose or means not. This contradiction between experience and transcendence, as two kinds of explanation ways, becomes the origin of Kant's critical philosophy.

Keywords—sublime; Kant; pre-critical period; empiricism; transcendence

I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of aesthetics, Kant's aesthetic thought is an insurmountable peak, and sublime is the core concept of his theory. In the past, most of the discussions on Kant's sublime theory refer specifically to the sublime theory in the critical period. Without his early related discourse on sublime and the historical origin of this concept, the understanding for Kant's sublime theory will become incomplete. In view of this, it is necessary for us to give a brief description of the sublime theory in the pre-critical period, which determines the several main contents of this paper: I. Historical retrospect of the concept of sublime, and a brief description about theories, views and opinions on sublime before Kant. II. Kant's understandings of sublime in *On the Sense of gracefulness and Sublime*. There is no doubt that Kant's understanding of sublime at this time is different from that in *Critique of Judgment*. Third, Kant's several unsolved problems at this stage.

II. THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE SENSE OF SUBLIME

Before pre-critical period of Kant, many thinkers and philosophers had detailed elaboration on the theory of sublime. We can only briefly introduce a few points of view and bring them into our discussion scope for the reason that they can be seen faintly in Kant's theory of the sublime.

A. Longinus: Sublime — "Echo of Great Mind"

In the history of Western aesthetics, Longinus first proposed sublime as an aesthetic category. "On the Sublime" focuses on the ideological level of the creator and the style of literary works to talk about the sublime. As far as the creator's thought is concerned, sublime stems from five elements: "the ability to master great thoughts", "strong and profound feelings", "proper use of rhetoric", "noble diction" and "solemn and vivid layout". As far as literary works are concerned, sublime refers to the mental state of literary works producing "ecstasy", that is, a mental state where people's emotions are white-hot, their spirits are highly excited and they are difficult to control themselves. Longinus pointed out that "grand style is the natural result of great thoughts, sublime speech often comes from broad-minded and ambitious people."¹

B. Burke: Sublime — Guarantee of "Self-safety"

Burke is a key figure in introducing the concept of sublime into aesthetics. Starting from the direct feeling and instinct of human beings, he focuses on the discussion of the physiological and psychological mechanism of the sense of sublime in *On Sublime and gracefulness*. Burke believes that "the sense of sublime" is a kind of "self-preservation" sexual passion. The sense of sublime is associated with the instinct of maintaining individual life, which mainly refers to the arousal of this feeling when individual life is in danger and threatened. The sublime discussed by Burke is actually a sense of pain, but it is different from those simple feelings of pain that is related to personal vital interests. When man keeps a certain distance from the object of fear and establishes an aesthetic relationship, the pain will be transformed into a sense of sublime, and people will get a certain degree of pleasure, thus entering the aesthetic realm in this kind of transcendence.

C. Winkelman: Sublime — the Repression and Expansion of the Soul

As one of the pioneers of the German Enlightenment Movement, Winkelman believes that the virtues of Greek artistic masterpieces lie in "noble simplicity and solemn and quiet greatness". He believes that this characteristic can best embody the great and balanced mind. The simpler the body

¹ Liao Lingzhu: A Translation Collection of Liao Lingzhu's Aesthetics, Renmin University of China Press, 1987, Vol. 1, P. 88.

state is, the more it can show the true characteristics of the mind. In this kind of situation, the mind is in a state of harmony and tranquility, which shows greatness and nobility. This kind of "noble simplicity and solemn and quiet great style" said by Winkelman is precisely his sublime aesthetic ideal. On this point, Kant is influenced by Winkelman.

III. EMPIRICISM AND TRANSCENDENCE OF SUBLIME SENSE

In the pre-critical period, Kant defined sublime and gracefulness as exquisite feelings that ordinary people would have. This kind of feeling evokes a sense of pleasure after stimulated by the outside world.² On the one hand, Kant emphasizes empirically sublime feelings, that is, to analyze sublime from emotional psychological experience and life experience. He analyzes all kinds of desires and qualities in people's life, talks about the distinction between nobility and gracefulness between men and women, and also delivers a splendid exposition of the morality of various nationalities and countries. On the other hand, Kant emphasizes the innate guarantee of the sense of sublime, tries to go beyond the description of emotional experience, and endows the sublime transcendental inevitability by using "providence" and "the great purpose of nature".

A. The Sense of Sublime of Laying Particular Emphasis on Empiricism

Kant regards the sense of sublime as the inner feeling of human beings, or a variant of ideal quality in life. Such kind of sublime, with a strong sense of experience, can be directly observed and experienced by us in experiential life.

First of all, for individuals, sublime sense can be understood from the empirical description of the structure of the mind. One is the awesome sublime sense, which not only comes from the magnificent scenery of nature, but also can be felt from the perseverance and terrible expression of human beings. "The sense of sublime is touching, and the sense of gracefulness is fascinating. A man who has undergone a full sense of sublime possesses a sincere, sometimes staunch and terrible expression. On the contrary, the lively feeling of gracefulness sense is expressed through the brilliant happiness in the eyes... and loud laughter".³ One is the sublime sense of melancholy. People who are emotionally melancholy have a sense of sublime of dominant position. The other is the sublime sense of magnificence. It is easy to find the sublime sense of magnificence with dominant position in people with exciting mental structure.⁴ Different from the mental structure of sublime sense, people with lively mental structure have dominant sense of gracefulness.

Second, the sense of sublime that is a kind of quality can be found various examples in the historical experience of the past and life experience. Kant believes that we can find that different nationalities share different sense of sublime through historical observation of different nationalities, or to say, that

the same sense of sublime has different manifestations in different nationalities. For example, a universal sense of honor can be called a sense of sublime, but different nationalities express the same sense of honor with their own historical images. The sense of honor manifests itself as vanity in the French nation, haughty in Spain, pride in England, arrogance in the German nation and arrogance in the Dutch.⁵

Kant's explanation of such sublime is more an empirical statement of the facts of life. When it comes to the mutual transformation between the sense of sublime and gracefulness, except that there is no precondition to explain that the two kinds of feeling have congenital origin,⁶ Kant more explains the possibility of the transformation of such two kinds of feeling on the level of life experience. If sublime is not accompanied and replaced by grace, it will make people unwilling to approach and tiresome. On the other hand, when the sense of gracefulness lacks noble elements, it will degenerate and become foolish and ridiculous.⁷ The sense of sublime and gracefulness can freely transform into each other: "Friendship is mainly the catharsis of the sense of sublime, while sex is the catharsis of the sense of gracefulness. However, tender and deep respect endows the latter with actual value and sublime sense."⁸

Once again, what inspire the sense of sublime are the real things of nature, and natural world directly triggers the sense of human sublime. The objects of stimulating the sense of pleasure are different, and the real objects of triggering sublime feelings are natural phenomena such as high mountains and lofty hills, storms and rains, tall trees and jungles, and distant starry sky; the real objects of triggering beautiful feelings are relatively small natural scenery and objects. The size of natural objects on the physics cannot be too strictly analogized to the two exquisite feelings of human beings: sublime must be great, while gracefulness can be insignificant, sublime must be simple, and gracefulness can be dressed up and decorated.⁹

Finally, the sense of sublime is more reflected in the gender differences between men and women. Women can take conception as gracefulness, while men can take name as sublime. In women, we can uplift the characteristics of gracefulness, and the sense of sublime is a prominent feature of men. From the perspective of reason, women' intellect is the intellect of gracefulness. In Kant's view, if the behavior is beautiful, then it should be very relaxed in expression. Therefore, graceful intellect should not need hard work to complete, and its object should be those things associated with good feelings. Men' intellect is to take abstract and boring knowledge as their goal, so men will cause amazement in this

⁵ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 55.

⁶ Nature always combines all the good things together and separates them temporarily in pursuit of its great goals. All kinds of beautiful separation are just a disguise, they actually come from the same source: a healthy and thriving temperament and interest. Kant only gave this conclusion without any further explanation or argument. See Kant, On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 38.

⁷ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 10.

⁸ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 7

⁹ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 3~5.

² Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", Business Press, 2001, P. 2.

³ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 3.

⁴ Kant: On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime", P. 21~22.

process of overcoming difficulties — this is a sense of sublime.

¹⁰From the perspective of moral trait, both the sense of sublime and gracefulness should be upgraded to morality, but "female virtue is a kind of graceful virtue": male virtue should be sublime virtue." Women do not do bad thing because it is wrong, but because it is ugly. ¹¹From the perspective of daily life, if two kinds of virtues are misplaced, men will not be like men, women will not be like women. Kant quips that if a woman thinks about the bitter theories of physics, it would be like letting her grow a beard. In the same way, we don't want to see women pretend to be men and become female nerds and warriors. On the other hand, the virtues of women when they are innocent and far away from disgusting things, if such virtues express too prominently in men, then men become foolish and ridiculous. Likewise, we don't want to see cream niche who pretends to be women to please others.

It is obvious that the above arguments, though relaxed and interesting, are more like the wit of philosophers appeared in observing the world than the serious thinking of philosophers.

B. Transcendental Guarantee of Sublime Sense

Kant is not satisfied with the empirical explanation of the sense of sublime, and he firmly believes that the human feeling has the inherent rationality. Emotional things, especially personal fickle feelings, are extremely unreliable. Only by confining certain human feelings to reliable principles can we guarantee the greatness of the sense of sublime. To ensure that the general emotional quality can be upgraded to a sublime condition, it naturally can no longer be empirical thing, but based on something beyond experience.

The principle of universality is the first basis of the sense of sublime beyond the scope of experience. Not all human feelings can be called sublime, only those virtues rooted in the above universal principles may be sublime. The more universal nature the principles are, the more sublime the virtues will be. ¹²Many of the qualities in people are good, lovely and beautiful, but they may not necessarily be consistent with the morality that includes the universal principle, or even contradict the universal law of morality in nature. Only when they are consistent with morality can they be sublime. For example, sympathy expresses well-meaning sympathy for the fate of others, but such feeling itself is weak and blind. Only when sympathy is based on the general friendliness and care for human beings can sympathy rise to its due universality and sympathy can be sublime. ¹³The other situation is more serious. If human spontaneous feelings are not constrained by a much higher universality, they will become the root of evil. ¹⁴

¹⁰ "Deep meditation and long-term unremitting thinking are noble but arduous, not suitable for an unrestrained charm is the performance of a graceful person." Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 31.

¹¹ Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 31.

¹² Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 14.

¹³ Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 12-13.

¹⁴ For example, the eager affection to think and do things for others on their own initiative, that is, hospitality. It will degenerate into flattery in the absence of higher principles. "Where the higher principle does not set

In real life, these universal moral principles are not easy to exist in the hearts of most people. Therefore, we need a kind of "providence" outside the people to ensure that feelings can become sublime. "Providence has placed such counseling impulses in us as a complement to virtue; they promote some people and do good deeds without principle, and at the same time give others who are governed by principles a greater impetus and a stronger impulse to tend to good deeds." ¹⁵In the *Collection of Criticism of Historical Reason*, this "invisible hand" becomes "non-social sociality". This "providence" is an external force, which drives people to do good things, at this time: people no longer act in accordance with the general principles of the heart. This kind of power is not morality in itself, which refers specifically to the sense of honor and shame endowed by providence. These two feelings become the internal tools and devices that providence promotes human action. ¹⁶

Nature's purpose is the second basis of sublime sense beyond empirical facts. In all kinds of situations, individuals in reality only unconsciously carry out various kinds of activities under the control of instinct and natural feelings. The so-called sense of sublime is only a kind of moral quality after the weighted average of these individual actions. The special individual embodies the great purpose of the whole nature. As classical economics claims, the self-regard individual's profit-making activities will "automatically" achieve the non-utilitarian moral goal of altruism. Here, the sense of sublime is no longer the pursuit of individuals, nor the feelings that ordinary individuals can easily achieve, but the external results of individual behavior. However, these numerous external actions are evaluated as "sublime" in the "goal of nature".

Accordingly, sublime is a feeling that conforms to the natural purpose. By this criterion, we can know the distinction between spontaneous feelings - unnatural feelings - and sublime feelings in reality. Once terrible sublime mixes with unnatural elements and lost universal principles, it is embodied in human nature as "adventurous"; as long as unnatural things contain sublime elements, they can only be transformed into "absurd"; the sexual instinct and imagination as the emotional basis, if there is no guidance of natural purposes and restriction of universal principles, then they are not related to the sense of sublime and gracefulness and can only degenerate into debauchery and frivolity. ¹⁷

IV. THE CONFUSION OF ARGUMENTATION OF THE SUBLIME SENSE IN THE PRE-CRITICAL PERIOD

Compared with his works in the critical period, Kant's exposition of sublime in *On the Sense of Sublime and Gracefulness* is like an essay rather than a rigorous philosophical work. It is easy to write, like flowing in the clouds and flowing in the stream, and the discussion of experience is more than rational analysis. Therefore, some contradictions within theory inevitably arise.

boundaries for it and weaken it, all evils may stem from it. "Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*", P. 14.

¹⁵ Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 14-15.

¹⁶ Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 15-16.

¹⁷ Kant: *On the Sense of Gracefulness and Sublime*, P. 10, 42.

A. *The Transcendental Guarantee of Sublime Sense Has Not Yet Been Explained*

Whether it is about the common roots of the sense of sublime and gracefulness, or the mutual transformation of these two feelings; whether the sense of sublime and gracefulness belong to men and women respectively, or the presentation of these two feelings in the history of different nationalities, Kant's exposition of the above viewpoints in *On the Sense of Sublime and Gracefulness* always wavers between experience and transcendence: sometimes, Kant talks about these questions in general terms; sometimes he tries to give transcendental principle proof to the discourse of experience.

However, after Kant attributes the transcendental basis of sublime sense to the providence, universal moral principle and the great purpose of nature, he does not make any provision or explanation for these transcendental principles. It can be said that he only uses these transcendental principles as the premise of his narrative without explanation, which is acceptable as general chat; but if we go into these principles seriously without any criticism, the judgment based on these principles can obviously only be "arbitrary" or "dogmatic" as Kant himself criticizes. Later, this task is accomplished by Kant in *Critique of Judgment*.

B. *Human Is the Purpose or the Mean of Nature*

In his exposition of the sense of sublime, Kant sometimes holds high the subjectivity of human beings, and holds that the sense of sublime is only human feelings; sometimes, he unconsciously reduces the subjectivity of human beings to the tool of natural self-realization, and the purpose of human beings is only the means of self-improvement of nature.

The great goal of nature is to achieve his goal by means of spontaneous feelings or conduct of human beings. In this case, many individuals become the means of nature's goal, and man himself is no longer his own goal. For example, in order to achieve the goal of nature — overall morality, each individual's sense of honor becomes a tool for nature to realize self-realization, and human's subjectivity is reduced to an intermediary means.

V. CONCLUSION

Kant's exposition of sublime sense is between experience and transcendence that are two kinds of explanation ways, and there is no crack that bridges them at this time. Here, we do not want to criticize Kant for not giving us the proper explanation: the so-called "crack" is just an unfair judgment that we stand at the basis of Kant's critical philosophy, which is to evaluate "On the Sense of Sublime and Gracefulness" in 1763 with "Critique of Judgment" in 1790. Another reason for exemption is that Kant does not intend to place human feelings (the sense of sublime and gracefulness) in the analysis of various human psychic abilities. On the contrary, the analysis of these "cracks" is only to explain that Kant's later exposition of sublime sense has inherent continuity with the pre-critical period and has made a complete explanation in the new standpoint. Here, we are just describing the sprout of ideology in Kant's aesthetics that has not yet unfolded, and the "crack" is the birthplace of the new ideas.

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