

# On Humour and the Kantian Sublime

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A city doctor moved to a country town and was treating a sick farmer on his property, but stopped going there after several visits. Puzzled, the farmer's wife phoned him to ask why.

"It's your ducks," the doctor explained to her. "Every time I visit the farm, they insult me."

– MACY LU  
Reader's Digest (SA)  
p. 26, May 2000

The Kantian sublime is about entertaining two mutually exclusive concepts in the mind at the same time — infinity and totality in the case of the mathematically sublime and an object being fearful without the observer being afraid of it in the case of the dynamically sublime.

"Most humour, " according to the Encyclopædia Britannica<sup>1</sup> "from the crudest practical joke to the most elegant witticism, comes from the sudden perception of a relation between two consistent but mutually incompatible contexts." Further, "laughter results in the playful disappointment of a listener's expectations." Clearly, there are some similarities between Kant's sublime and humour; however, Kant clearly did not intend the sublime to be akin to humour. In fact, words such as 'playful' are used during the explication of the beautiful and the agreeable and used to contrast the agreeable and beautiful with the sublime.

In order to investigate the link between humour and the sublime, this essay will first consider Kant's own ideas about humour and compare it to the description of humour quoted from the Encyclopædia Britannica above. Next Kant's description of both versions of the sublime will be considered and compared to notions of humour. The essay will be concluded by revisiting the link between the sublime and humour.

In order to refer to specific paragraphs in the Critique of Judgment, the notation (§1.2) will be used to denote the second paragraph of section 1. English

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<sup>1</sup>Vol. 6 p. 145, 1986

quotations from the Critique of Judgment are taken from Pluhar's translation<sup>2</sup>. German quotations come from the version published by Projekt Gutenberg on the Internet.<sup>3</sup>

## Kant on Humour

Section 54 of the Critique of Judgment contains Kant's thoughts on humour. "Es muß in allem, was ein lebhaftes, erschütterndes Lachen erregen soll, etwas Widersinniges sein" (§54.5). Pluhar translates *Widersinniges* as *absurd*; however, *Widersinniges* can also be translated as *contradictory* or *clashing*. Thus translated, Kant's view agrees with that quoted from the Britannica above. To illustrate, the word *quack* implied by the joke at the beginning of this essay has different 'meanings'; by misusing the word from the 'duck' context in the 'medical' context a momentary relationship is created between the two incompatible contexts — hence the humour. Or, to focus on *Widersinniges*: the two meanings of *quack* are interchanged in an incompatible manner.

Kant, however, does not want to focus on the momentary contradiction (or absurdity). The resolution of the tension brought about by the joke is more important (§54.5): "*Das Lachen ist ein Affekt aus der plötzlichen Verwandlung einer gespannten Erwartung in nichts.*" This momentary (*plötzlichen*) change is not where the involvement of the mind ends — the mind plays with the contradiction: "Merkwürdig ist: da in allen solchen Fällen der Spaß immer etwas in sich enthalten muß, welches auf einen Augenblick täuschen kann; daher, wenn der Schein in Nichts verschwindet, das Gemüt wieder zurücksieht, um es mit ihm noch einmal zu versuchen, und so durch schnell hintereinander folgende Anspannung und Entspannung hin- und zurückgeschnellt und in Schwankung gesetzt wird" (§54.8). Such playing with thoughts is an essential part of much of Kant's Critique of Judgment and this will be considered again below in the context of the sublime.

Kant is correct that many jokes work by establishing some tension that is resolved in a moment. I, however, disagree with Kant that such tension and resolution are the essence of humour. That tension is an essential part of a joke can be demonstrated by considering the degree to which one is drawn to listen to someone telling a joke — even when one knows that the speaker often tells jokes that are not funny. To demonstrate that such tension is not an essential part of humour, one can consider one-line jokes and puns: without enough time to establish tension they confront the listener immediately with the alignment of incompatible contexts. I therefore contend that contradiction or the alignment of incompatible contexts form the essence of humour, rather than resolution of tension into

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<sup>2</sup>I Kant, Critique of Judgment, Translated by WS Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987

<sup>3</sup>I Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, <http://www.gutenberg2000.de/kant/kuk/kuk.htm>

nothing.

One other aspect of Kant's thoughts on laughter needs to be considered before we consider the sublime. For Kant the mental side of the joke has little value; the value lies in the (physical) laughter. It is the physical act of laughter "alone, and not what goes on in the mind, that is the actual cause of our gratification" (§54.9). However, many forms of humour are often enjoyed in contexts where (physical) laughter is unnecessary or inappropriate. When reading jokes in a library where silence is maintained, the jokes can still be appreciated. When a Freudian slip of the tongue causes a speaker at a formal ceremony to say something hilarious, laughing is inappropriate but the contradiction can be funny and even gratifying.

## The Mathematically Sublime

Initially it seems that the sublime is merely that what is larger than anything else: "*Erhaben ist das, mit welchem in Vergleichung alles andere klein ist*" (§25.7). However, it soon becomes clear that the sublime involves a (human) realisation that the mind can surpass what can be sensed: "*Erhaben ist, was auch nur denken zu können ein Vermögen des Gemüts beweiset, das jeden Maßstab der Sinne übertrifft.*" (§25.8).

More important, for the current discussion is the mind's unification of incompatible contexts when it considers something that is sublime: "When the imagination performs the combination [*Zusammensetzung*] that is required to present a magnitude, it encounters no obstacles and on its own progresses to infinity, while the understanding guides it by means of numerical concepts" (§26.7). "But the mind listens to the voice of reason within itself, which demands totality for all given magnitudes, even for those that we can never apprehend in their entirety but do . . . judge as given in their entirety" (§26.8). Clearly the bounded (*begrenzte*) and unbounded (*unbegrenzte*) are from incompatible contexts, but come together at the moment when the sublime is experienced.

Moreover, as was argued above, that humour is experienced in the mind, the sublime is also experienced in the mind and does not form an inherent part of the object that is considered: "Man sieht hieraus auch, da die wahre Erhabenheit nur im Gemüte des Urteilenden, nicht in dem Naturobjekte, dessen Beurteilung diese Stimmung desselben veranlat, müsse gesucht werden" (§26.12). And, similar to how the mind played with the contradiction in the case of humour above, and "just as the æsthetic power of judgment in judging the beautiful refers the imagination in its free play to the *understanding* so that it will harmonize with the understanding's *concepts* in general . . . so in judging a thing sublime, it refers the imagination to *reason* so that it will harmonize subjectively with reason's *ideas*" (§26.11).

## The Dynamically Sublime

The contradictory contexts that are aligned in the dynamically sublime are *fearful* and *not being afraid* (§28.3). “Compared to the might of” any such fearful things, “our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place. And we like to call these objects sublime because they raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (§28.5).

## Synthesis

The question that needs to be answered now is: If both the sublime and the humorous exist in the subject who experiences incompatible contexts being momentarily associated, what is the essential difference between the two? Note that, in both cases — the sublime and the humorous — the effect is to be found in the subject and is not a feature of the object as such. (This facet of the sublime has been motivated above; in the case of humour, it is necessary to keep in mind that the necessary incompatible contexts or alignment between them are very often culturally determined and therefore is not necessarily part of the joke itself.) Finally, in the case of both the sublime and humour, the mind vibrates (or resonates) between the incompatible concepts to fully appreciate the effect. So what is the essential difference?

I contend that humour and the sublime form exact opposites in the way the mind resolves the conflict. The sublime leaves one with the feeling that the mind can surpass the infinite or the absolutely fearful. One finds delight in this capacity of the mind. In contrast, the humorous literally resolves the conflict by making it disappear. Above I have rejected Kant’s notion that the humorous exists in tension that comes to nothing. However, resolution in the case of humour does show that the apparent conflict is merely part of a false story — “the joke must contain something that can deceive us for a moment” (§54.6). In this Kant is correct: “the illusion vanishes” (§54.6). To emphasise, the sublime tells the mind that it can exceed the unbounded; the humorous tells the mind that it can also find delight in something without any true meaning. The agreeable nature of humour lies in the fact that it brings immediate gratification. However, it is a distinct possibility that, if the mind exalts in its experience of the sublime, it exalts in the range of

experiences it is capable of when it enjoys the insignificance of humour.

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