

Trembling in fear and passion: Kierkegaard's leap of faith as a source of the sublime

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Abstract:

This essay investigates how Søren Kierkegaard's *leap of faith* can be viewed as a sublime esthetic experience along the lines of the theories of Longinus and Edmund Burke. In Kierkegaard leaps of faith incorporate feelings of terror and passion. Grounded in notions of eternity and truth, they create occasions for particular kinds of sublime experiences. To Kierkegaard the *leap of faith* is the step by which one grows into one's authentic self. This essay suggests that the leap of faith is significant also because of its intrinsic esthetic value.

Keywords: leap of faith; Kierkegaard; sublime; Longinus; esthetics

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I. Introduction

Taking a leap of faith plays a significant role in our lives because it allows us to go forward when we want to act against the dictates of pragmatic reason. Facing the precipice of unknown odds and outcomes, one can either shy away from making a choice, or one can decide based on faith and hope for the best. For Søren Kierkegaard, to whom the concept of "leap of faith" is attributed, taking leaps of faith is a primary means for progressing through life's stages and becoming an authentic self.

However, is the worth of the leap of faith purely instrumental – i.e. useful for making choices and becoming a self – or does it have some kind of intrinsic worth as well? More particularly, the guiding question of this essay will be: In what ways can the leap of faith be said to have intrinsic *esthetic* value for a person? I will suggest that besides its role in shaping one's authentic self, the Kierkegaardian leap of faith can be a source of the esthetic category of the sublime as described by Longinus and Edmund Burke, two of its most well-known theorists. Making a choice that overpowers reason² is a terrifying experience, but facing this terror is the power of the individual who can choose absolutely and for eternity; moreover, at the passionate moment of choice, one experiences a coupling of ecstasy and truth. All of these characteristics reveal a sublime dimension to the leap of faith.

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² In this paper I will delimit my use of reason to the meaning of "instrumental" or "pragmatic" reason. In this sense of the concept, it is the capacity to take suitable means for one's ends, and is hence usually understood to be opposed to faith. For more information on the nature of instrumental reason and its connection to other senses of reason, see Bratman, *Practical Reason*.

But what is the sublime? It is an esthetic category traditionally opposed to the beautiful, as it involves degrees of elevation, grandeur, and terror that are not necessarily found in beautiful experiences. The meaning and explanation of the sublime have undergone many changes from ancient times to today, varying from Longinus' *hypsos*³ to Lyotard's "postmodern sublime".⁴ Perhaps one could say that there is no one unified concept of the sublime, but a plethora of esthetic experiences that are connected through family resemblance. Some of the most widely encountered features of the sublime across theories are, on the one hand, an object of great physical, conceptual, or emotional magnitude, and on the other, a corresponding feeling of awe in the subject. A paradigmatic sublime moment is witnessing an ocean storm, eloquently described by Arthur Schopenhauer:

[when] we are on the high seas, in a raging storm, with waves as tall as houses rising up and sinking back down again, violently breaking against steep cliffs on the shore, spraying foam high into the air, the storm howling, the ocean roaring, lightning flashing from black clouds, and thunderclaps drowning out the storm and the sea.⁵

Most authors agree that the sublime can be found both in nature and in art. Besides whirlpools and ocean storms, sublime objects can be cathedrals and castles, but also epic poems and overwhelming tragedies. Human acts can be sublime too, and as I will argue here, so can be the act of choosing. An extensive analysis of the sublime, however, is beyond the scope of this essay, and instead of going through the complex history of the concept, I will base my discussion on three of the sublime's most salient characteristics, taken from Burke and Longinus: terror, infinitude, and a coupling of ecstasy and truth.

As mentioned above, there have been many theories of the sublime throughout the history of western philosophy, and Longinus and Burke approach the topic from two quite different directions and from two vastly distant time periods. Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* is usually dated to the 1st century AD⁶ and is primarily concerned with how the sublime can be expressed through literature. Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was published in 1757, and seeks to locate the bodily sources of the sublime ("producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves"⁷). Yet, I have picked these two authors because, on the one hand, they represent some of the most widely agreed-upon features of the sublime, such as the intense emotion and "grandeur of conception"⁸ that arise out of witnessing an awe-inspiring force; and on the other, because these features seem the ones most relevant for an analysis of Kierkegaard's notion of the leap of faith.

A final note of clarification: there are three life stages in Kierkegaard's philosophy: the esthetic, the ethical, and the ethical-religious. The leap of faith is usually seen as the stepping stone from the ethical into the ethical-religious stage, as when Abraham's faith in God overpowers all the rules of ethics and reason and allows him to sacrifice his son Isaac.⁹ In this paper, however, I will understand the leap of faith in broader terms, applicable not only to religious faith, but to any type of faith that can make one take risks that cannot be supported purely by prudence. Sometimes a person, having faith in love, honor, justice, etc., makes risky choices that cannot be justified on purely rational grounds. There is perhaps quite a difference between religious faith and faith in other values, because, at least for Kierkegaard, religious faith can *never* be completely resolved by reason. That is to say, one can never reach a state in which one can purely rationally assess the rightness of the choice to believe in God. In contrast, taking a leap of faith in marrying someone one does not know well will at some point more or less reveal itself to have been the right or wrong decision. But putting these

³ Longinus, *On the Sublime*.

⁴ Lyotard, *Analytic of the Sublime*.

⁵ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 229.

⁶ I assume one of the most widely agreed-upon opinions as to the authorship and dating of "On the Sublime" but there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the issue. See Doran, *Theory of the Sublime*, 29-ff.

⁷ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 134.

⁸ Doran, *Theory of the Sublime*, 59.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37.

differences aside, I will consider the leap of faith broadly, to include also the leap one takes to progress from the esthetic to the ethical stage. When a person foregoes being guided by pleasure (the esthetic) in order to lead a life of commitments, such as marriage, friendship, and the moral law (the ethical), she is taking up a frightening task, one that pragmatic reason cannot guarantee to be successful.

II. Terror

A defining feature of the sublime, identified already by Longinus,¹⁰ and made central by Burke, is that it involves terror, for example from the “uncontainable forces”¹¹ of whirlwinds, storms, thunder and lightning:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.¹²

Burke, however, warns that taking delight in danger can only come if the spectator is at a safe distance from it. There is a difference between witnessing a whirlwind and being taken away by a whirlwind, since if one is physically threatened, one will be in pure dread rather than in ecstatic awe.¹³

Furthermore, Burke observes that danger is often embellished by obscurity. When darkness and mist hide the full dimensions of grand buildings and landscapes, they make them appear more menacing; ghosts and goblins inspire dread because no one can form “clear ideas” about them.¹⁴ Danger lurks in the unknown, and so the less we know about the full extent of something frightening, the more sublime it becomes.

Turning to the leap of faith, it is an embrace of the unknown of the outside world, what Kierkegaard calls its “objective uncertainty”:

Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. . . If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am ‘out on 70,000 fathoms of water’ and still have faith.¹⁵

There would not be a need to take a leap of faith in the first place if there was no danger involved in the choice. Stepping into the ethical-religious stage comes precisely with taking the great risk of going beyond the bounds of rationality. The eponymous feeling of fear and trembling arises when, facing the unknown, one has only faith as a guide. Going back to the story of Abraham,¹⁶ God’s command is utterly terrifying because it involves an unthinkable transgression against morality; Abraham cannot, on the basis of reason, justify the deed of sacrificing his innocent son, neither to others nor to himself.

Furthermore, any truly passionate commitment is frightening, because when one makes an authentic choice, one sacrifices the safety of floating around in the “great multiplicity”¹⁷ of possibilities, i.e. of the ability to choose something else. As I will show further on, a prime example of this is Kierkegaard’s discussion on marriage: choosing a spouse is

¹⁰ Doran, *Theory of the Sublime*, 74.

¹¹ Porter, *Sublimity in Antiquity*, 52.

¹² Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 39.

¹³ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 33-5.

¹⁴ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 60.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, “Postscript”, 207.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 9-11.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, “Either/Or,” 73.

eternal and irreversible. Adding to this is the burden one has to bear by taking responsibility for one's choice for eternity, which is accompanied by profound angst.¹⁸

But even though choosing on the basis of faith is frightening because of the possibility of mistake and the burdens of commitment and responsibility, it does not instill the type of fear that comes from being directly physically threatened. Taking a leap of faith usually involves an apprehension of one's profound vulnerability in being "out on 70,000 fathoms of water," but not producing primal fear for survival, this apprehension helps set the stage for a sublime experience.

III. Infinity

The sublime can only occur when there is an apprehension of something grand and overwhelming, and by definition, what can be grander than ideas of infinity? Both for Burke and Longinus, infinite magnitudes – be they in space or in time – are prime sources of the sublime. Infinity is a word Kierkegaard uses in connection with many concepts throughout his oeuvre, but here I will specifically focus on two infinite dimensions of the leap of faith, one conceptual and one emotional: eternity and infinite passion.

First of all, a choice is a real choice only if it is made absolutely and for eternity. In the words of Judge William who represents the ethical life stage in *Either/Or*, "if one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment."¹⁹ A real choice is categorical, as can be discerned from Kierkegaard's discussion of marriage. Against the esthete, for whom it makes more sense for a couple not to pledge their love for eternity but only "until next Easter, until next May Day,"²⁰ Judge William paints the portrait of a man who has chosen marriage as someone who conquers time in its eternity:

[The married man] has not fought with lions and trolls but with the most dangerous enemy, which is time. But now eternity does not come afterward, as for the knight, but he has had eternity in time, has preserved eternity in time. Therefore only he has been victorious over time, for it may be said of the knight that he has killed time, just as one to whom time has no reality always wishes to kill time, but this is never the right victory. Like a true victor, the married man has not killed time but has rescued and preserved it in eternity.²¹

Burke mentions that the rhythmical beating of forge hammers is sublime because it can give the impression of an infinite succession of noises²²; analogously to a forge hammer, one repeatedly needs to reaffirm, day after day, one's choice for eternity.

Secondly, the laborious task of committing absolutely and for eternity can only be taken up by an individual who faces it with great emotion, or in the words of Kierkegaard, with "infinite passion."²³ Passion is the expression of commitment without which the choice is null: "what is important in choosing is not so much to choose the right thing as the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses."²⁴ Why precisely this passion is "infinite" is open

¹⁸ The concept of anxiety is – to my knowledge – the only other connection between Kierkegaard and the sublime that has been made in scholarly literature. John Milbank relates the indeterminacy of the postmodern sublime with the fearful anticipation of indeterminacy that is Kierkegaard's anxiety (Milbank, "The Sublime in Kierkegaard"). In passing, George Pattison draws an analogy between Kierkegaard and the Kantian sublime (Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion*, 5-14), but acknowledges that there are also substantial differences between the two concepts, notably that while the sublime is supposed to be a pleasurable experience, Kierkegaardian anxiety is wholly terrifying. Here rather than anxiety I focus on the sublime aspects of the leap of faith, which includes anxiety, but also the counterbalancing positive feeling of passionate faith.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," 73.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," 59.

²¹ Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," 70.

²² Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, 73.

²³ Kierkegaard, "Postscript," 207.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, "Either/Or," 73-4.

to interpretation, but it seems to mean absolute, unconditional devotion. It discloses the full power of an individual's freedom, and is the only force that can confront the uncertainties of authentic choice.

This clash of two infinite forces – the eternity of commitment and the passion of the chooser – creates a prime occasion for a sublime experience to take place.²⁵ A passionate leap of faith reveals one's greatness of character, and as Longinus observed: "sublimity is the echo of a noble mind."²⁶ To illustrate this claim – that the disclosure of a great mind is sublime – Longinus gives the famous example of Ajax' silence in the underworld.²⁷ In this scene from Homer's *Odyssey*, Ajax refuses to speak to Odysseus when the two meet in the underworld, revealing that the Trojan hero's anger with Odysseus for taking Achilles' armor is so great that it spans beyond the earthly life. Ajax is a hero who is capable of such powerful emotion that his choice is made for eternity; one could say his sublime silence demonstrates precisely the intensity of emotion and the eternity of choice that are found in the Kierkegaardian leap of faith.

IV. Ecstasy and Truth

One of the most elusive aspects of the emotional intensity that comes with the Longinian sublime is its connection to truth. For Longinus, the sublime is an effect achieved through language which lasts for only a brief moment, "shatters everything like a bolt of lightning"²⁸ and "naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we had ourselves produced the very thing we heard."²⁹ But, in line with other esthetic theories of the ancient world, this momentary elevating experience strikes one not only on an emotional level, but also involves an apprehension of a kind of truth. It therefore couples an ecstatic "transformative moment of consciousness" with a truth that is hard to pin down, but could be expressed as an "enlarged comprehension of reality."³⁰

This coupling of ecstasy and truth is strikingly similar to Kierkegaard's conception of faith. Faith is a kind of truth that is attainable through infinite passion, where the "*emphasis is [not] on what is said*", but "*on how it is said*. [...]" At its maximum, this 'how' is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite is the very truth."³¹ One is convinced in the truth of Christianity not by rational arguments. This would be the wrong way to approach it, since the outside world is too uncertain to supply the rational ground for religious certainty.³² Rather than looking outside, then, one should passionately look inwards to discover Christianity's truth.

One way to think about the truth that is revealed through infinite passion is that it makes the individual feel *certain* about some aspect of her life. Just as in Greek tragedy, in a cathartic moment one discovers truths about the world and oneself, such as what it means to be a human being and what is truly valuable for one's life, so in a moment of infinite passion a person finds within herself the truths that allow her to go through with her choice. A leap of faith would not be possible without believing firmly in something in order to counterbalance the outside world's frightening uncertainty.

V. Conclusion

Even though I highlighted many conceptual similarities between Longinus' and Burke's theories of the sublime on the one hand and Kierkegaard's description of the leap of faith on the other, there are naturally many differences between the three authors as well. A quite obvious one is that while Longinus and Burke speak of the sublime as found primarily in art or in nature, the leap of faith does not really have to do with either; it is rather elicited internally, from the

²⁵ Similar to this, but beyond the scope of this paper, is the conflict between infinity and reason that lies at the heart of Kant's conception of the "mathematical sublime" (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 131-43).

²⁶ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 185.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 163-5.

²⁹ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 179.

³⁰ Halliwell, *Ecstasy and Truth*, 331.

³¹ Kierkegaard, "Postscript," 206.

³² Kierkegaard, "Postscript," 212.

chooser's own reflection, and does not necessitate the presence of an object of nature or art. Furthermore, there are many more insightful theories of the sublime that could be applied on the leap of faith. Of particular interest would be to read Kierkegaard's description of stepping from the ethical into the ethical-religious stage in light of Rudolf Otto's notion of the "numinous", the profound fear and awe that accompanies religious worship.³³ My analysis of the connection between the sublime and the leap of faith is thus only a very limited first step.

I have, nevertheless, tried to demonstrate the sublime nature of some of the most important ingredients that make up the leap of faith. Some choices in one's life are terrifying because they involve risk. Not knowing whether one is making the right decision, one must nevertheless bear eternal responsibility for it. Committing to one's choice is accompanied by the idea of the eternity of commitment, its daily lifelong reaffirmation. And opposed to this frightening conception is the individual's infinite passion, which alone can give her the certainty necessary for her to take the leap forward. At the moment of choosing, therefore, a person is struck emotionally by both terror and passion, and her thoughts are filled with the grandeur of the choice's eternity and the certainty of her inner-found truth. All of this together meets many of Longinus' and Burke's criteria for a sublime experience.

So what does discovering the leap of faith's esthetic side tell us? For one, it opens up the possibility to appreciate in more depth the brave choices of both literary heroes and real people. Looking at it from a Kierkegaardian perspective, one can see why in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, there is a touch of the sublime in Frodo's choice to venture into Mordor as the ring-bearer. Though he does not have the experience and fighting prowess of the other heroes, Frodo feels certain that he is the one who should take up the perilous task. He bears eternal responsibility for his choice, and he needs to laboriously reaffirm his commitment as his path becomes more dangerous with each passing day.

But I want to emphasize another reason why noticing the esthetic side of leaps of faith is important. Besides being instrumental for one's growth, taking a leap of faith enriches the life of a person because it is a valuable moment in itself.³⁴ If this is indeed the case, then people's lives might become impoverished if there are fewer opportunities to take leaps of faith. After all, looking back at one's life, perhaps the moments when one decided to passionately commit to the projects one believed in will be among one's dearest memories.

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³³ Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 5-24.

³⁴ The argumentative step from the leap of faith's having esthetic value to its enriching the life of a person is one that I will assume is intuitively plausible at first glance. However, the precise normative significance of having sublime experiences in one's life is a big and complex topic that I will not go into here.

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