

Awe & Sublimity

Robert Clewis observes philosophers and psychologists discussing great things.

According to psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, who published an influential paper on the subject fifteen years ago, ‘awe’ involves a response to something larger than oneself – a perceived vastness – and a need for accommodation, referring to how we make sense of and adjust to what we experience. And although we sometimes use the word without much thought, ‘the sublime’ has a long philosophical history, dating back to a treatise attributed to a first-century writer known as Longinus. I conceive of the concepts of awe and the sublime as more or less the same, and will use the words interchangeably. Recent renewed interest in the concepts of awe and the sublime gives us a chance to test some of the philosophers’ claims about them, as well as to modify some of the theories put forward in psychology.

There is much on which the philosophical tradition and empirical research agree. The sublime (awe) is the complex, mixed feeling of intense satisfaction sensed before a striking or inspiring object, event, or act. It includes the positive feeling of exaltation before a vast or powerful object, such as a natural wonder or marvel of architecture. Some examples of things that elicit awe include the Grand Canyon or the starry sky, mountain ranges, and storms or hurricanes (if viewed from a safe distance). Some of the grandest human artifacts can evoke similar feelings: soaring cathedrals, mighty hydroelectric dams, ancient ruins. It is a mixed experience – a combination of satisfying and discomforting elements. Nonetheless, overall it is positive and pleasant, and perceivers typically want the experience to continue.

Sublime Psychology

We are all aware of the bodily or physiological changes associated with awe: goose bumps, dropped jaw, raised eyebrows, widened eyes, a sense of time slowing down.

Recent empirical research is much more than an updated version of the somewhat crude physiology put forward by eighteenth-century statesman Edmund Burke when he wrote about aesthetics. It employs modern fMRI brain scans to measure levels of activity in different areas of the brain in real time. This enables researchers to explore which areas of the brain are associated with different tasks and different experiences. This research not only deepens our understanding of the human brain but also can help us investigate some long-standing philosophical theories about the sublime. One of the most influential is by Immanuel Kant, who argued that the pleasure of the sublime was based on the recognition of one’s own power of reason in the face of the power of nature. His idea, itself influenced by ancient Stoic thought, was that however great or vast nature might be, the mind is still greater. On this reading, the experience involves an explicit awareness of oneself. But a study by neuroscientists Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki suggests that the self-consciousness claim is false, as do other studies conducted by psychologists. They say that a person experiencing the sublime is instead oriented outward toward the external world: awe

draws attention away from the self and toward the environment, and the brain regions associated with self-awareness are deactivated, not activated. It appears that the experience involves a sense of belonging to something bigger, to a larger whole – either the vast object triggering the experience, or to the universe as a whole, the totality of nature.

However, Ishizu and Zeki did find that in terms of brain activity, experiences of sublimity and beauty differ fundamentally, suggesting that Burke and Kant appear to have been right to make conceptual distinctions between an experience of the sublime and an experience of beauty – a conceptual move not made by Hegel and his followers. Also in line with Kant and Burke, they found that the sublime is not exactly a kind of fear. They found that the overall patterns of brain activity during this experience were significantly different from the activity observed in studies dealing with fear, pain, or threat. This is because although the object eliciting the feeling is vast or powerful and thus potentially menacing, we nevertheless feel safe; just as Kant suggested. If we, observing on the shoreline, actually *were* on the ship at sea during the storm, we *would* feel fear. But since we are not on the ship, we are able to find it awe-inspiring instead.

Awful Pleasures

Their fMRI brain scans also showed that on experiencing the sublime the imagination is activated, as Kant and twentieth-century philosopher Jean-François Lyotard had suggested. When we place ourselves on the ship while not being on the ship, we are stretching our imaginations.

Why should this bring about pleasure? One of the main questions concerning the sublime is why it is pleasant rather than painful. A team of psychologists and I have identified three main sources of the pleasure: the expansion of the imagination; the belonging to a whole larger than us; and the rising above everyday affairs. Leaving the everyday concerns behind provides a release, which feels good. (My team and I are eager to report the results of our study, which is not yet concluded.)

One possible etymology of the word sublime is ‘rising up to the threshold or lintel’, from *sub* (‘up to’) + *limen* (‘lintel, threshold’). Thus, the sublime has to do with going up to the limit or edge of normal experience, or even exceeding it. It is not uncommon to connect the sublime to religion. But while some experiences of the sublime are religious experiences, others are not. Indeed, various types of sublimity can be distinguished by their triggers: God; a powerful leader; or a large, formidable object. I like to call the religious kind the *transcendent* sublime, and the kind stimulated by the vast or powerful object or the powerful leader, the *immanent* sublime. I also think of the sublime as a thread with two strands made up across the different sides of the limit: the two strands weave together, creating its complex history. The transcendent thread concerns the ineffable and unnamable, while the immanent tends to focus on the emotion, perceptual and imaginative play in the experience.



Life-Altering Experiences

Finally, psychologists tend to think awe refers to a life-changing and transformative experience – one that alters one’s perspective. Once there is accommodation to the sublime experience, they maintain, one comes out a different person and sees the world differently.

I am ambivalent about whether we should see awe as involving a kind of epiphany. I agree that it would be useful to understand the long-term effects of the experience. We could carry out a study involving repeated observations over a prolonged period. We might well discover that awe has interesting and beneficial therapeutic applications.

Yet, leaving aside the usual problems accompanying such studies (funding, time, resources), it may not be the best theoretical move to pack so much into the concept of the sublime. If it is *defined* as a life-changing and transformative experience, this seems to raise the bar too high, rendering awe too rare, even too significant. How many life-changing experiences, after all, can

one have in a single lifetime? Perhaps it is better to see the sublime/awe as Burke and Kant did: as a rich experience running parallel to beauty, but still aesthetic and imaginative, as beauty is.

However the questions are settled, philosophers and psychologists can help each other refine and flesh out their theories and formulate the questions to be asked. The psychological, neuro and cognitive sciences would profit from knowing awe’s philosophical history. In turn, philosophy could profit from the empirical investigation of those of its claims that lend itself to such study.

Establishing the best relationship between psychology and philosophy will doubtless continue to be an ongoing issue. This case shows that they can collaborate in a fruitful way and profit from each other’s work, just as they have in other areas, such as over free will and moral psychology.

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