

# Reverence and Awe In Epicurean Philosophy

Post by “Susan Hill” of October 24, 2020 at 8:20 AM

>>Elayne:Ah, interesting, Susan-- I actually don't think it is something in the baby, the music, or the aurora, any more than I think the pain of a hot pepper is in the pepper.

No, me neither. But super-spicy foods do have something in common. They are all recognized by the human body as being a toxin inimical to human health, and so the body reacts accordingly. Now this example is complicated by the fact that some people, like my husband, really like that “stimulation”, but as a doctor, I think you take my meaning.

>>E: I think all feeling responses are properties of the subject doing the feeling, and that similar stimuli will often bring about similar feelings because we are in the same species.

I take no issue with that either.

>>E:I don't think the Aurora Borealis, absent an observer, contains anything that would universally provoke awe.

Nope, not universally, if the common factor were not recognized by a particular observer. But the quality that you respond to in a baby does not disappear when you are not looking at the baby.

>>E:We know some of the typical human triggers of awe. Things that are vast in size tend to do it, like mountains.

That would apply to two of the items in my list, the aurora and the cosmos. For many of the items, size is not a factor (e.g. music, or equations).

>>E:Paul Pearsall wrote a whole book about Awe, which he proposed was actually a specific basic emotion.

That's good. I'm glad everyone can feel it.

I want to wait a bit after Cassius moves the thread to see if there are any other responses to my question re what do all of these objects that inspire awe for many people, or even just a few, have in common. The reason I am holding back before making my own suggestion, if that I am fishing for a possible vocabulary that athiests or agnostics might use to describe this thing, one that is not laden with negative connotations for them. Obviously, there are a whole lot of words that smack of Platonism and its descendants that are much too coloured to effectively convey what I wish. So let me sit on it for a bit.

>>Why we evolved awe would be an interesting evolutionary biology question-- does it serve some sort of fitness function? I bet this was an interesting talk-- the blurb describes awe as having a pro-social function, so maybe it has helped humans survive and reproduce.  
<https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/events/the-evo...of-the-sublime/>

"The talk is slated to chart the emergence of awe in the mammalian piloerection response, and review evidence of awe's universality. Following that, Keltner will consider evidence concerning how awe functions to situate the individual within social collectives, detailing studies showing how awe increases prosocial tendencies, humility, a small self, and the sense of common humanity. To conclude, the talk he will consider recent studies in partnership with the Sierra Club showing how awe benefits veterans and inner city students, in their experiences."

I don't know what the arguments are, but it is true that religious folk like to form communities. Others abhor "organized religion". Still others are motivated by an awe response to what they think of as God by becoming hermits, with the intention of devoting their whole attention to that god or feeling.

>>I am fascinated by the whole guru phenomenon. If someone perceives that vastness in a charismatic leader, this does tend to lead to extreme hierarchies where people give up their own judgment in favor of someone else's. Perhaps it is wise to be cautious with awe, lol.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Awe>

Yes, people can do crazy things to try to get "closer" to that feeling!

The wiki entry is really useful. I want to paste it here and look more closely. My notes in brackets:

"Awe

Awe is an emotion comparable to wonder[1] but less joyous. On Robert Plutchik's wheel of emotions[2] awe is modelled as a combination of surprise and fear.

{As Epicureans we want to nix that fear, but we might still tremble or have our breath taken away..}

One dictionary definition is "an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful, or the like: in awe of God; in awe of great political figures." [3] Another dictionary definition is a "mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might: We felt awe when contemplating the works of Bach. The observers were in awe of the destructive power of the new weapon." [4]

{I would argue that "awe" of a weapon or a car or a new Gucci bag isn't what we are talking about in this instance.}

In general, awe is directed at objects considered to be more powerful than the subject, such as the Great Pyramid of Giza, the Grand Canyon, the vastness of the cosmos, or God. [5][6]

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1733-reverence-and-awe-in-epicurean-philosophy/?postID=9504#post9504>

## Definitions

Awe is difficult to define, and the meaning of the word has changed over time. Related concepts are wonder, admiration, elevation, and the sublime. In *Awe: The Delights and Dangers of Our Eleventh Emotion*, neuropsychologist and positive psychology guru Pearsall presents a phenomenological study of awe. He defines awe as **an "overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection with a startling universe that is usually far beyond the narrow band of our consciousness."** Pearsall sees awe as the 11th emotion, beyond those now scientifically accepted (i.e., love, fear, sadness, embarrassment, curiosity, pride, enjoyment, despair, guilt, and anger)."[7] Most definitions allow for awe to be a positive or a negative experience, but when asked to describe events that elicit awe, most people only cite positive experiences.[8]

{My highlights are in bold.}

## Etymology

This Atlanta lightning strike may have inspired awe.

The term awe stems from the Old English word *ege*, meaning "terror, dread, awe," which may have arisen from the Greek word *áchos*, meaning "pain." [9] The word awesome originated from the word awe in the late 16th century, to mean "filled with awe." [10] The word awful also originated from the word awe, to replace the Old English word *egeful* ("dreadful"). [11]

## Theories

### Evolutionary theories

#### Awe reinforces social hierarchies

Keltner and Haidt [1] proposed an evolutionary explanation for awe. They suggested that the current emotion of awe originated from feelings of primordial awe – a hard-wired response that low-status individuals felt in the presence of more powerful, high-status individuals, which would have been adaptive by reinforcing social hierarchies. This primordial awe would have occurred only when the high-status person had characteristics of vastness (in size, fame, authority, or prestige) that required the low-status individual to engage in Piagetian accommodation (changing one's mental representation of the world to accommodate the new experience).

{I wish to refer back to Joshua's earlier entry on dismissing significant personal experience. I have never been in awe of a "powerful, high-status individual", although I have respected a few. It doesn't seem fair to dismiss a person's statements by saying "oh, you just believe that because it is a primitive residual instinct, or because of random firings in your brain." I think this might qualify as a straw man argument, but I'm not sure.}

Keltner and Haidt propose that this primordial awe later generalized to any stimulus that is both vast and that requires accommodation. These stimuli still include being in the presence of a

more powerful other (prototypical primordial awe), but also spiritual experiences, grand vistas, natural forces/disasters, human-made works, music, or the experience of understanding a grand scientific theory. Keltner and Haidt propose that awe can have both positive and negative connotations, and that there are five additional features of awe that can color one's experience of the emotion: threat, beauty, ability, virtue, and the supernatural.

{This seems a bit of an odd use of the word "vastness", which usually just refers to size, but maybe that is a word, used in this way, that has not been sullied by significant religious connotations yet.}

Awe is a sexually-selected characteristic

Keltner and Haidt's model has been critiqued by some researchers, including by psychologist Vladimir J. Konečni.[12] Konečni argued that people can experience awe, especially aesthetic awe (of which, according to him, a "sublime stimulus-in-context" is the principal cause) only when they are not in actual physical danger. Konečni postulated that the evolutionary origins of awe are from unexpected encounters with natural wonders, which would have been sexually selected for because reverence, intellectual sensitivity, emotional sensitivity, and elite membership would have been attractive characteristics in a mate, and these characteristics would also have given individuals greater access to awe-inspiring situations. Since high-status people are more likely to be safe from danger and to have access to awe-inspiring situations, Konečni argued that high-status people should feel awe more often than low-status people. However, this hypothesis has yet to be tested and verified.

{This is highly speculative, and is not born out by our actual real-time modern experience.}

Awe increases systematic processing

A third evolutionary theory is that awe serves to draw attention away from the self and toward the environment.[8][13][14] This occurs as a way to build informational resources when in the presence of novel and complex stimuli that cannot be assimilated by current knowledge structures. In other words, awe functions to increase systematic, accommodative processing, and this would have been adaptive for survival. This hypothesis is the most recent and has received the most empirical support, as described in the section on social consequences of awe.

{This is actually quite interesting, and bears some similarity with my experience, although I am not entirely clear on how it is adaptive for survival. That would mean that we feel more awe than our early ancestors. I'm not sure about that.}

Non-evolutionary theories

Sundararajan's awe

Humanistic/forensic psychologist Louis Sundararajan[15] also critiqued Keltner and Haidt's model by arguing that being in the presence of a more powerful other elicits admiration, but

does not require mental accommodation because admiration merely reinforces existing social hierarchies. Sundararajan expanded upon Keltner and Haidt's model by arguing that first, an individual must be confronted with perceived vastness. If an individual can assimilate this perceived vastness into her or his existing mental categories, s/he will not experience awe. If an individual cannot assimilate the perceived vastness, then s/he will need to accommodate to the new information (change her or his mental categories). If this is not accomplished, an individual will experience trauma, such as developing PTSD. If an individual can accommodate, s/he will experience awe and wonder. By this model, the same vast experience could lead to increased rigidity (when assimilation succeeds), increased flexibility (when assimilation fails but accommodation succeeds), or psychopathology (when both assimilation and accommodation fail). Sundararajan did not speculate on the evolutionary origins of awe.

## Research

Despite the meaningfulness that feelings of awe can bring, it has rarely been scientifically studied. As Richard Lazarus (1994) wrote in his book on emotions, "Given their [awe and wonder's] importance and emotional power, it is remarkable that so little scientific attention has been paid to aesthetic experience as a source of emotion in our lives" (p. 136). Research on awe is in its infancy and has primarily focused on describing awe (e.g., physical displays of awe and who is likely to experience awe) and the social consequences of awe (e.g., helping behavior and susceptibility to persuasion by weak messages).

## Precipitants

Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007)[8] had participants write about a time they felt awe and found that nature and art/music were frequently cited as the eliciting stimulus. Although most definitions allow for awe to be positive or negative, participants described only positive precipitants to awe, and it is therefore possible that positive awe and awe+fear (i.e., horror) are distinctly different emotions.

## Emotional experience

In the same set of experiments by Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007),[8] the researchers had participants write about a time they recently experienced natural beauty (awe condition) or accomplishment (pride condition). When describing the experience of natural beauty, **participants were more likely to report that they felt unaware of day-to-day concerns, felt the presence of something greater, didn't want the experience to end, felt connected with the world, and felt small or insignificant.**

It is not yet known whether awe is experienced differently in different cultures.[16]

## Physical displays

Researchers have also attempted to observe the physical, non-verbal reactions to awe by asking participants to remember a time they felt awe and to express the emotion nonverbally.[17] Using this method, researchers observed that awe is often displayed through

raised inner eyebrows (78%), widened eyes (61%), and open, slightly drop-jawed mouths (80%). A substantial percent of people also display awe by slightly jutting forward their head (27%) and visibly inhaling (27%), but smiling is uncommon (10%). Cross-cultural research is needed to determine whether physical displays of awe differ by culture.

#### Personality and awe

**Some individuals may be more prone to experiencing awe.** Using self- and peer-reports, researchers[13] found that regularly experiencing awe was associated with openness to experience (self and peer-ratings) and extroversion (self-ratings). Later studies[8] also found that people who regularly experience awe ("awe-prone") have lower need for cognitive closure and are more likely to describe themselves in oceanic (e.g. "I am an inhabitant of the planet Earth"), individuated, and universal terms, as opposed to more specific terms (e.g. "I have blonde hair").

#### Social consequences

A more recent study found that experiencing awe increased perceptions of time and led to a greater willingness to donate time, but not to donate money.[18] The greater willingness to donate time appeared to be driven by decreased impatience after experiencing awe. Experiencing awe also led participants to report greater momentary life satisfaction and stronger preferences for experiential versus material goods (e.g. prefer a massage to a watch).[18] **Awe, unlike most other positive emotions, has been shown to increase systematic processing, rather than heuristic processing, leading participants who experience awe to become less susceptible to weak arguments.**[14]

{LOL!}

#### Awe and aweism

Awe has recently become a topic of interest in atheist groups, in response to statements from some religious individuals who say that atheists do not experience awe, or that experiencing awe makes one spiritual or religious, rather than an atheist. For example, see Oprah's comment that she would not consider swimmer Diana Nyad an atheist because Nyad experiences awe, as well as the response to this video by interfaith activist Chris Stedman.[19]

Awe is often tied to religion, but awe can also be secular. For more examples, see the writings on being an "aweist"[20] by sociologist and atheist Phil Zuckerman, the book Religion for Atheists[21] by author Alain de Botton, and the video on how secular institutions should inspire awe by performance philosopher Jason Silva.[22]

{So lot of interesting stuff in this wiki that might help!}

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>>Cassius: We'd need to incorporate that part of Lucretius that discusses how eyes were not born so we could see, etc. That passage has always been mysterious to me, along with the

observation that the gods could not have created the universe because they would have had no pattern.

Interesting. Yes, I'd have a hard time fitting it into a natural selection/adaptation model. But then there are a lot of things that are hard to shoe-horn into that - like music, aesthetics in general, and philosophy. 😊