Why the Sublime Is Aesthetic Awe

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the conceptual relationship between awe and the experience of the sublime. I argue that the experience of the sublime is best conceived as a species of awe, namely, as aesthetic awe. I support this conclusion by considering the prominent conceptual relations between awe and the experience of the sublime, showing that all of the options except the proposed one suffer from serious shortcomings. In maintaining that the experience of the sublime is best conceived as aesthetic awe, I draw from historical theories of the sublime as well as recent work in empirical psychology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Consider the possibility that awe and the experience of the sublime are nearly the same thing, only referred to by another name, and that psychologists studying awe are investigating what philosophers of art have been calling the sublime. In that case, aestheticians interested in the sublime might well gain from a deeper awareness of what is going on in psychological research on awe.

Drawing on the philosophical tradition on the sublime that began with Longinus sometime in the first or third century, we can say that the experience of the sublime is paradigmatically an intense, mixed but overall pleasing, aesthetic experience in response to an object or event that exhibits striking vastness or power. To say that it is “mixed” means that the experience has both negative and positive elements, even if on the whole it is gratifying and even exhilarating.

Awe is likewise a mixed experience but overall pleasing (having a positive valence). As psychologists typically conceptualize it, awe consists in a response to a vastness (either perceptual or conceptual vastness), followed by a need to make sense of it in terms of one’s conceptual framework. This latter challenge to one’s mental schemas creates the need for accommodation. When that need is satisfied, awe involves a change of perspective or outlook, a readjustment or revision of one’s concepts or way of thinking.

The sublime has been the topic of a vast body of literature in philosophy and rhetorical theory for more than two millennia (Costelloe 2012; Porter 2016). It is striking that while there is an extensive literature on the sublime in philosophy, there is hardly a philosophical debate about awe, much less a venerable body of writings on awe in the history of philosophy. Empirical psychologists, on the other hand, have devoted a significant amount of scholarly attention to awe—even if only quite recently. Beginning with a far-reaching article by Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt (2003), there is a large and still growing psychological literature on awe that now extends to subfields such as empirical aesthetics. There remain very few psychological investigations into the sublime, however. Although studies first started appearing around 2012 (e.g., Eskine et al. 2012), empirical research on the topic started picking up only around 2017. These interesting developments naturally raise the question of how psychological work on awe relates to philosophical discussions of the sublime.

There is not yet consensus in either psychology or philosophy about how awe and the experience of the sublime are related to each other. Some researchers proceed as if they were completely unrelated. Others hold that awe is a component or ingredient of the experience of the sublime; still others...
maintain that the two are connected but do not specify how. Another perspective is simply to conflate the two concepts and use them interchangeably. In recent work in philosophy, meanwhile, some theorists have held that the experience of the sublime and awe are distinct but related. For instance, Emily Brady thinks of awe and the sublime as “neighboring concepts” (2019, 358).

Below, I argue, first, that we need to turn more attention to the relation between awe and the experience of the sublime. Then, following Margherita Arcangeli and colleagues (2020), I lay out seven conceptual relationships between awe and the experience of the sublime. I then reject all but one of them, arguing for the view that the experience of the sublime is a kind of awe, namely, aesthetic awe.

The following, then, is a discussion of potential relationships between two mental states or experiences; it is not an investigation of causal relationships, including any attempt to describe the stimuli or elicitors of these mental states. Moreover, while I recognize that the term ‘sublime’ can sometimes be predicated of objects, I here follow Edmund Burke (2019), Immanuel Kant (2019a), and William Wordsworth (2019) (and many other writers) in treating the sublime as (also) a mental state or reaction to a given elicitor. In the work of philosophers such as Burke and Kant, the sublime is understood as a subjective state or feeling, as reflected in the very titles of their works published in 1757 (Burke’s Enquiry) and 1764 (Kant’s Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime). In referring to the sublime as an awe-like aesthetic emotion, Keltner and Haidt view the sublime as a subjective state (2003, 299). The conception of the sublime as a subjective emotion or experience is also found in the work of Matthew Pelowski and colleagues (2021). In short, there is precedent in both theoretical and empirical research for thinking of the sublime as a subjective state.

II. A LACUNA

Philosophers and empirical researchers would profit from an analysis of the awe-sublime relation for three main reasons. Recent work in empirical psychology has recognized the need to work out the relation but has not yet done so. Traditional usage of the English words ‘awe’ and ‘sublime’ suggests a close (yet still undefined) affinity between the two. Finally, recent philosophical work on the sublime, if equipped with a proper understanding of the awe-sublime relation, could then be in a better, more self-aware position to draw from empirical research on awe.

II.A. Recent Work in Empirical Psychology

Contemporary research in empirical aesthetics, to its credit, pays some attention to the history of aesthetics. Many of the articles briefly canvas the history of the sublime. The research is filled with references to Longinus, Kant, Schiller, and many writers on the sublime. But the psychology literature is influenced by the writings of one text above all: Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Given the psychological nature of many of Burke’s observations, perhaps this is unsurprising. Keltner and Haidt (2003) mention Burke, setting the stage for similar invocations in empirical studies. Tomoshiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki (2014) and Ortlieb and colleagues (2016) both invoke Burke in the very titles of their papers.

Although Keltner and Haidt refer to the sublime as an “awe-like aesthetic emotion” (2003, 300), they do not pursue the matter, mentioning the sublime in only a few paragraphs. Though they briefly discuss Burke, they do not substantially draw from philosophical outlooks on the sublime or explicitly explore the awe-sublime connection. That this was a missed opportunity did not go unnoticed. Vladimir Konečni observes that Keltner and Haidt do not attempt to clarify the awe-sublime relation, simply considering awe a “family” of emotions (Konečni 2005, 30). But work in psychology is starting to correct this oversight. Young-Jin Hur and colleagues rightly note that the source of Keltner and Haidt’s theorization is clearly “a matter of the sublime” (2020, 254).

Arcangeli and colleagues recognize the need to figure out the awe-sublime relation too. In their literature review, they observe that it is striking that “awe is almost absent from the philosophical agenda, while there are very few studies on the experience of the sublime as such in the psychological literature” (2020, 2). They ask whether there is here just one type of experience that has been labeled differently in different disciplines, or whether instead a different kind of relationship obtains. In short, empirical psychologists recognize the need for a better understanding of the awe-sublime relationship. They point out that the analysis could be beneficial for the theoretical and empirical disciplines.
alike. Once we have a clearer understanding of the relationship between awe and the sublime, philosophers will “be able to use empirical results about awe in a philosophical analysis of the experience of the sublime, which in turn can help us to design novel experimental hypotheses about the contexts in which we experience awe” (2).

II.B. Usage in English

“Awe” is etymologically rooted in the Proto-Germanic word for terror or fear. It originally had a tight link to fear and submission to power (particularly towards a divinity), and gradually connoted dread combined with a more subdued and positive veneration and reverence for an authority or moral greatness (Keltner and Haidt 2003, 308). Many writers in English, historical and contemporary, use “awe” and the “sublime” in similar ways and contexts. (In III.A, I quote several passages that indicate this.) Even if “awe” was used by prominent theorists of the sublime (including Burke), they did not make awe the object of their study. In short, what this close semantic link or usage implies about the awe-sublime relationship still needs to be specified.

II.C. Recent Philosophy on the Sublime

There continues to be a lively debate concerning the sublime in philosophical aesthetics. Following articles by Guy Sircello (1993) and Jane Forsey (2007) in this journal, some philosophers discuss the very possibility of a theory of the sublime. I cannot go into this debate here, but it is worth noting that empirical psychologists are investigating the sublime (and awe) and proceed as if a theory were possible. In other words, they find such skepticism unfounded (Pelowski et al. 2021), at least from an operational point of view. Other philosophers attempt to propose and defend theories of the sublime, while at the same time addressing this metadebate about the possibility of the sublime (e.g., Brady 2013; Deligiorgi 2014; Hanauer 2016), and some draw from the empirical studies of awe (Shapshay 2021). In this recent work in philosophy, however, the need to define precisely the awe-sublime relation has not been widely acknowledged. While there are some statements here and there about the sublime and awe, we do not yet have a thorough philosophical attempt to analyze and delineate the awe-sublime relationship.

One payoff for aestheticians of a better understanding of this relationship is that, since awe and the experience of the sublime are so closely related, we might profit from learning about empirical research on awe. The proposed analysis paves the way for such awareness. A result of the conceptual analysis in this paper could therefore be the forging of a bridge between philosophical aesthetics and empirical-psychological approaches. This amounts to “translating” between these two with the hope of making their respective literatures more accessible to scholars working in the theoretical and empirical disciplines.

III. AWE AND THE SUBLIME: THE MAIN CONCEPTUAL RELATIONS

The following seven approaches to the awe-sublime relation were also identified by Arcangeli and colleagues (2020), although for the sake of my argument I have modified their order of presentation. (While these might not be all of the conceptual possibilities, they are the most plausible and prominent ones.) After briefly identifying six options and stating the problems with each, I consider the one I find most compelling—the sublime as aesthetic awe.

III.A. Awe and the Experience of the Sublime Are Unrelated to Each Other

Although Keltner and Haidt call the sublime an “awe-like” emotion (2003, 300) and therefore see some relationship between awe and the experience of the sublime, the research that adopted their framework over the past 17 years has largely overlooked the concept of the sublime and its history (two early exceptions are Konečni 2005 and 2011). Given that psychological research has progressed without looking at the sublime until only very recently and that philosophical discussions of the sublime hardly offered explicit analyses of awe, one might think that they are no more related than are other aesthetic concepts such as beauty and elegance.

The problem with this view is that the history of writing (in English) about the sublime reveals an intimate link between the two. Awe and the experience of the sublime were talked about in the same
contexts, in which the two were not opposed to each other (as beauty and the sublime sometimes were) but were instead placed in affinity.

Here are several passages from eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British writers that suggest, at the very least, that awe and the sublime are in a family resemblance relation, and probably even something stronger. In the Enquiry, Burke lays out his ideas about the sublime in terms of “reverential awe” (2019, 86). Speaking of the sublime evoked by ideas of God, he claims that there are innumerable passages that “establish the general sentiment of mankind, concerning the inseparable union of a sacred and reverential awe, with our ideas of the divinity” (86). (Throughout this section, the references to “awe” are italicized.) This connection is also reflected in a body of interesting yet overlooked writings by eighteenth-century British women. Elizabeth Carter writes, “Not a house, or a human creature was within my view, nor a sound to be heard but the voice of the elements, the whistling winds, and rolling tide. I found myself deeply awed, and struck by this situation” (2019, 103). Third, in one of her letters, Anna Seward reports having “enthusiasm for marine scenery. After a 16 years inland residence, I approached, with awe-mixed delight, the mighty mass of animated water.” She describes feeling “pleasing awe” before a scene of floods:

A flooded valley, beneath the cloudy lour of a wintry moon, is one of those terrible graces in scenery, which the survey of danger, and the consciousness of protection, always form to people of strong imagination. I gaze with pleasing awe on the swoln, the extravagant, and usurping waters (Seward 2019, 162).

The protagonist in Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novel The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), Emily, feels “elevated” by the scenery of the Apennine mountains, even if she “seldom felt those emotions of indescribable awe” that she experienced while passing over the much more striking Alps (Radcliffe 2019, 166). Emily gazes with "melancholy awe" when she sees Montoni’s castle, which is described as “sublime.” The “gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object” (166). How the Alps captured the British imagination can be seen in a fifth passage. In describing her first exposure to the Alps, Helen Maria Williams writes, “It was not without the most powerful emotion that, for the first time, I cast my eyes on that solemn, that majestic vision, the Alps! – How often had the idea of those stupendous mountains filled my heart with enthusiastic awe!” A few lines later, Williams clearly writes about the sublime. “I longed to … wander amidst those regions of mysterious sublimity, the solitudes of nature” (2019, 171). The poetry of William Wordsworth (for instance, The Prelude) not only contains renowned descriptions of experiences of the sublime, Wordsworth also wrote a prose piece on the topic. He describes what he means by “the sensation of sublimity” by using the phrase “comprehensive awe” (2019, 180). He also writes: “A native of a mountainous country, looking back upon his childhood, will remember how frequently he has been impressed by a sensation of sublimity from a precipice, in which awe of personal apprehension were the predominant feelings of his mind” (179). Finally, Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointedly writes about the sublimity of a Gothic cathedral: “But the Gothic art is sublime. On entering a cathedral, I am filled with devotion and with awe” (2003, 87).

These passages clearly imply that there is some positive correlation between awe and the sublime. If anything, the fact that awe and the sublime were frequently used to cover very similar conceptual terrains might be taken to suggest that they are referring to the same type of experience. This is the next option.

### III.B. Awe and the Experience of the Sublime Are the Same Type of Experience

Some of the passages quoted above could at first glance be taken to support option two. It is also sometimes defended in the philosophical literature. Katie McShane once wrote: “The concept of the sublime as it has been discussed in philosophy … from about the mid-eighteenth century onward I take to be the same concept as awe. Many other commentators seem to agree on this point” (2013, 756n34). Pelowski and colleagues attribute this position to Keltner and Haidt and claim that the latter use the “sublime” and “awe” “interchangeably” (Pelowski et al. 2021, 8n2). (This attribution is actually inaccurate, since Keltner and Haidt call the sublime an awe-like emotion and do not simply identify awe and the experience of the sublime.)
There are problems with this second view. Seeing awe and the experience of the sublime as extensionally equivalent (i.e., they always pick out and refer to the same experiences) seems unsupported both by empirical studies of awe and the sublime (e.g., Pelowski et al. 2021) and (as we have just seen) by writings about awe and the sublime.

The claim that awe is identical to the experience of the sublime seems misleading. After all, there are some experiences that seem to be instances of awe but not of the experience of the sublime. For instance, when I first meet a person of high rank or celebrity whom I admire, I am likely to feel (at least initially) awe rather than an aesthetic experience of the sublime. If that is the case, awe and the sublime cannot be the same type of experience.

As McShane has more recently observed, awe, as conceived in psychology, lacks some features that “at least some theorists have attributed to the sublime” (2018, 474). If that is right, awe and the experience of the sublime cannot be identical. Moreover, if awe and the experience of the sublime were the same type of experience, one could reasonably expect the research on awe to have noticed this and to have quickly become at the same time research on the sublime. But it is only now, almost 20 years after Keltner and Haidt’s article, that researchers and theorists have acknowledged the need to figure out the relation between awe and the experience of the sublime.

III.C. There Is Some Overlap in Extension and Intension, but Awe and the Experience of the Sublime Are Not Identical. They Share Only an Element or Part (or Parts)

One version of this third view is that awe and the sublime stand in a family resemblance relation. As already noted, Brady claims that the two are “neighboring concepts” (2019, 358), and Keltner and Haidt refer to the sublime as an “awe-like aesthetic emotion” (2003, 300).

Another way to interpret this third option is to see awe as lying on a continuum with the experience of the sublime. For instance, the experience of the sublime can be thought of as a more extreme kind of awe. Burke appears to adopt a version of this when he views “astonishment” as the highest degree of the sublime, viewing admiration, reverence, and respect as less intense forms. “Astonishment … is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence and respect” (2019, 80).

This third view acknowledges some relation but does not specify which part or parts. Accordingly, it would be useful to flesh out five points of overlap between awe and the experience of the sublime.

1. **Mixed valence.** Both awe and the experience of the sublime have been characterized as mixed valence experiences. That is, they involve a sense of being overwhelmed, which can present itself as a negative feeling, as well as a sense of positive uplift, a sense of pleasure or even exhilaration.

2. **Vastness and need for accommodation.** Awe and the experience of the sublime both involve (using the psychological terminology) a perception of vastness and a need for accommodation. In philosophical theories, the sublime is a response to a great power or extent (i.e., vastness). This interaction with a great power or extent creates the noted negative moment. The person recovers from this, feeling pleasure and satisfaction, sometimes with an altered outlook (“accommodation”).

3. **Self-loss and connectedness.** Awe involves a sense of self-loss as well as feelings of connectedness or belonging. According to some theories of the experience of the sublime (for instance, Schopenhauer’s), a sense of self-loss and belonging are found in the experience of the sublime, too. The loss and connectedness are linked: while undergoing self-loss, a person feels more connected to other creatures or to the universe as a whole.

4. **Altered time perception.** Both awe and the experience of the sublime involve a sense of altered time perception. In the experience of awe, time appears to slow down. Kant identifies an alteration of time perception in the sublime. The sublime involves “a subjective movement of the imagination, by which it does violence to the inner sense” and thus to time perception (2019a, 132). Likewise, Burke maintains that all the “motions” of the soul “are suspended” during the sublime (2019, 80).

5. **Similar physiological responses.** Awe and the experience of the sublime have been conceptualized as involving similar bodily responses or physiological reactions. Yaden and colleagues (2019) identified the eyes slightly widening, the jaw slightly dropping, gasping, goosebumps, and chills...
as physiological changes reportedly associated with awe. This is consonant with the findings by Hur and colleagues (2020).

There are two additional similarities that should be mentioned. First, both can be thought of as being subjective states. In the case of awe, this is evident. It may appear less obvious that the sublime can be a subjective state, but, as already noted, it was quite common in the eighteenth century to view the sublime as a feeling or subjective state, a point also present in Keltner and Haidt (2003) and Pelowski and colleagues (2021). Accordingly, the term ‘the sublime’ can be applied to the subjective pole and is not reserved exclusively for the stimulus.

Second, both have been theorized as requiring psychological distancing. Awe and the experience of the sublime involve aspects of active spectatorship and observation of some vastness or power, rather than practical or pragmatic, goal-directed engagement with the object or event (e.g., Kant 2019a; Schopenhauer 2019). In the psychological literature, this idea has been expressed in terms of “psychological distancing mechanisms” and has been proposed as part of a distancing-embracing model (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 35).

The notion that aesthetic experience (including a fortiori aesthetic awe) occurs in a disinterested/distanced context, however, has been criticized in recent philosophical discussions. Just to give one example—from Nicholas Wolterstorff (one of many possible writers that could be mentioned here)—it is suggested that talk of “disinterestedness” and “disinterested aesthetic attention” be replaced by that of “absorbed attention” (2015, x). Unfortunately, since this is a vast topic, I can do little more than acknowledge it here. Nonetheless, I will note that it is not immediately clear that the notions of “disinterested aesthetic attention” and “absorbed attention” are so far apart conceptually. Indeed, Wolterstorff at one point implies that they perform the same kind of conceptual work (x). In any case, I recognize that philosophers have questioned the usefulness of distinguishing “aesthetic” from non-aesthetic experiences, as well as the relevance of disinterestedness and distancing to that distinction.

The notion of “distancing” has been criticized in the empirical literature too. Martin Skov and Marcos Nadal (2020), for instance, seem to think that the notion of “distancing” implies that aesthetic experience makes use of a distinctive psychological and neurobiological system. Thankfully, however, this is not implied by the notion of distancing (or absorbed attention). It need not be thought that there is a special neurobiological marker or correlate of aesthetic experiences. The aesthetic may be conceptualized as activating the same basic pleasure “system” that is used to assess the liking of sensory objects. It may well be that (to use their terms) “neural activity associated with hedonic appreciation overlaps” in interested and disinterested cases alike—such as when subjects appraise how food tastes, if faces are attractive, how striking a roaring waterfall is, or if music or visual art are to their liking (Skov and Nadal 2020, 646). The proposed framework of aesthetic experience is not committed to the idea that there is a distinct system of hedonic pleasure, a special system of aesthetic appreciation or appraisal that is different from the ordinary one in terms of function or physiological processing. It need not require the supposition of special neurobiological mechanisms for aesthetic liking (Menninghaus et al. 2020, 653). Accordingly, in the case of the sublime, it seems useful (albeit controversial) analytically to distinguish aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences.

In short, while this third view is not wholly inaccurate, its characterization of the awe-sublime relation requires further development: perhaps the relationship can be made more precise (as in the seventh option).

### III.D. Awe Is an Ingredient of the Experience of the Sublime

This fourth view differs from the third by specifying which is an ingredient of which.

In the historical writings surveyed earlier, some of the authors appear to view awe as an ingredient of the experience of the sublime. For instance, recall that Wordsworth wrote of being “impressed by a sensation of sublimity from a precipice, in which awe of personal apprehension were the predominant feelings of his mind” (2019, 179).

We also see this view in recent discussions in both philosophy and empirical research. Cynthia Freeland writes, “The sublime has been held to be a grand object … that produces in us a characteristic combination of painful and pleasurable feelings of terror plus awe and elevation” (2019, 280, em-
phasis added). Here, “painful and pleasurable feelings of terror” are combined with awe and elevation, which appear to be (positive) ingredients of the experience of the sublime.

Psychologists Lisbeth Bethelmy and José Corraliza propose that awe is a component of the “sublime experience toward nature” (2019, 3). The other key component of the sublime is “inspiring energy” (7). They propose to view the sublime as a “unifying feeling that encompasses awe and positive and pleasurable emotions within a single construct” (4). Another proponent of this view is found in the neuroscience study by Ishizu and Zeki, where awe and fear (among other components) make up the multi-component experience of the sublime (2014, 6).

The problem with this position is twofold. First, it is not sufficiently clear what it means to be a “component” (or ingredient) or how much this is tied up with a (controversial) component theory of emotions. But, second, “awe” here seems to be conceived as either simply negative or positive, performing the role of either the negative or the positive ingredient in the mixed experience of the sublime. In the Freeland quote, it is doing some positive work (“plus awe and elevation”). In Ishizu and Zeki’s understanding of the experience of the sublime, (presumably positive) awe is combined with fear (and other elements) in order to produce the sublime (2014, 7). Yet awe is usually conceived as being itself mixed, a combination of initial overwhelming (response to vastness) followed by a need to recover (accommodation). Thus, it seems odd to have awe do the work of only the positive (or negative) element in a mixed experience.

Admittedly, there is a possible response to this worry. One could propose that there is in fact a negative or “threat-based” variant of awe. Since this touches on the role of fear in the experience of the sublime, however, I discuss it in the next section of this article (Section IV). Let me simply here state that I do not think that introducing this negative variant will save the fourth option, since fear violates the distancing (or perception of existential safety) that is required for the experience of the sublime. Such a negative variant might well be a mode of fear, but it would not be an aesthetic experience.

### III.E. The Experience of the Sublime Is an Ingredient of Awe

This view is the converse of the one immediately above (III.D). Amie Gordon and colleagues (2017) appear to defend this option, claiming that the sublime can have a “dark side.” It is unclear what theoretical or conceptual reasons they have for viewing the relation this way, however. They seem motivated by the desire to recognize a threat-based variant of awe. But this leads to a problem that is the mirror image of the one just noted: the experience of the sublime is then seen as mostly negative. However, this is not how the experience of the sublime is typically conceived in philosophy and psychology, both past and contemporary. It is widely accepted that the experience of the sublime has an overall positive valence (Arcangeli et al. 2020, 2). To put it another way, if the threat (posed by the powerful or vast elicitor) is thought to be real, it might elicit (actual, strong) fear and thereby violate the distancing or disinterested condition that is required for aesthetic experiences of the sublime.

Thus, even if the meaning of “ingredient” were made sufficiently clear, there is a problem that is the inverse of the one we encountered in (III.D) above. Since the experience of the sublime is mixed, it seems to confuse matters to claim that the experience of the sublime is either the wholly positive ingredient, or going against the traditional view, that it is the wholly negative ingredient in another experience that is itself mixed (awe).

### III.F. Awe Is a Species of the Experience of the Sublime

The term “species” here indicates something ontologically more substantial or weighty than the “ingredient” mentioned in the fourth (III.D) and fifth (III.E) views. It indicates a kind, type, or sort, not just a component, element, or part.

If there were different kinds of experiences of the sublime, this sixth view would merit some consideration: awe might be one of those kinds. So, are there different kinds of the sublime?

In a certain sense, in the theoretical literature one finds countless compound “kinds” of the sublime (technological sublime, rhetorical sublime, natural and ecological sublime, etc.)—where the word ‘sublime’ is typically preceded by an adjective. Thankfully, it is easy to explain what is going on here. In many of these cases, the different kinds of the sublime are being differentiated according to their stimuli or elicitors. The divine or the gods elicit the religious sublime, natural marvels evoke the ecological sublime, the internet induces the technological sublime, and so on.
In a second (related) type of case, when a preceding adjective is based on a proper name (e.g., Wordsworthian sublime, Hegelian sublime), it is just a way to identify or discern the kind of sublime under discussion and is not meant in any profound or substantive sense.

Now, one might say (invoking the first type of case) that awe is a species of the religious sublime or of the political sublime. This is not conceptually incoherent; however, no one appears to be defending this approach. Moreover, the genus of the sublime in which one places awe seems rather arbitrary. Why (besides having different elicitors) would awe be a species of the religious sublime rather than of the political sublime? If it is instead part of both of these, why would that be the case? Again, none of this has been proposed and developed.

Nevertheless, there is a separate sense in which we can speak of distinct kinds of sublime experiences. Whereas the foregoing kinds were differentiated according to their objects, Sandra Shapshay’s (2019) designation of the “thin” and “thick” kinds of the sublime provides a subject-based or phenomenological differentiation of two varieties. The thin and the thick variants of the experience of the sublime reflect differences in the particular kinds of engagement and modes of interaction with the object. The thin is a more immediate, sensual-perceptual response, whereas the thick is more cognitively inflected, involving reflection on the stimulus, the subject’s response, or the relation between the subject and the stimulus.

Could one then say that awe is a species of the thin sublime but not the thick? This possibility is suggested by Arcangeli and colleagues (2020). “On the hypothesis that awe is a purely noncognitive, emotional response … it might be suggested that it coincides with a species of ES [the experience of the sublime], namely the ‘thin sublime’” (2020, 4). Unfortunately, this does not hold up. On Shapshay’s account (2021), awe is found in both the thick and the thin variants. The thick sublime includes (and may even involve reflection on) the “awe” response of the thin sublime. Since awe is found in both the thick and the thin sublime, it would make no sense to distinguish the two kinds of the sublime in terms of awe, that is, by saying that awe is a species of only one of them.

If awe is conceived as more basic or fundamental than the experience of the sublime, moreover, it seems misguided to say that awe is a species of the experience of the sublime, rather than the converse. The thick sublime, for instance, seems to be more culturally specific than awe, and thus less basic (Shapshay 2021). If awe is more fundamental than the sublime, it seems fitting to consider it the genus, not the species. In addition to requiring further development, then, this sixth view appears to misconstrue the genus/species relation. This leads to the seventh and final option, which is the converse of the sixth.

III.G. The Experience of the Sublime Is a Species of Awe

Given that the other six alternatives have serious shortcomings, this is the best option.

It has been defended in both psychology and philosophy. Keltner and Haidt (2003) read the Burkean sublime as a kind of awe. Although they do not elaborate on aesthetic awe in their paper, its very title indicates that awe can be “aesthetic.” Koneční posits aesthetic awe as a peak aesthetic experience and treats it “as the prototypical subjective reaction to a sublime stimulus-in-context” (2011, 65). After surveying the seven views of the awe-sublime relation, Arcangeli and colleagues conclude that there is nothing wrong with this option. “There are no prima facie reasons against this reading … which remains a workable option” (2020, 4). In fact, it is about this option alone that they make such an assessment. In their conclusion, moreover, they give a positive defense of it.

If all cases of awe involve the same kind of positive evaluation (the object of awe is subjectively evaluated as being of great importance [i.e., impresses us in some way]), different cases of awe concern different species of importance. One of these species is aesthetic importance, or importance from an aesthetic point of view. (2020, 4)

In The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto (2019) likewise distinguishes the sublime from religious feelings evoked by divine transcendence. The sublime is an aesthetic category providing a more concrete or familiar way of thinking about the transcendent mysterium tremendum (i.e., the divine). “Religious feelings are not the same as aesthetic feelings, and ‘the sublime’ is as definitely an aesthetic term as ‘the beautiful’, however widely different may be the facts denoted by the words” (Otto 2019, 393n4).
Following Otto, Philip Quinn distinguishes aesthetic from religious awe. He understands aesthetic awe, the focus of his essay, in terms of the “traditional aesthetic category of sublimity” (1997, 292). Quinn also usefully observes that to claim that there is some distinction does not imply that there is always a sharp line of demarcation. In some cases, it may be hard to tell whether the awe is aesthetic or religious (Quinn 1997, 293). While Shapshay (2019) once held another view, she now holds a version of the view that the sublime is aesthetic awe (Shapshay 2021). Shapshay had already usefully observed, too, that awe is distinct from the sublime because, whereas the sublime involves actual aesthetic attention, the feeling of humility in awe “need not” involve such attention (2019, 331).

As we did in six (III.F) above, we can ask how we should understand the respective compound forms—in this case, social-political awe, religious awe, natural awe, technological awe, and so on. As before, often this is simply reflecting differences among the elicitors (status, political power, the divine, landscape, technology, film). But sometimes the “aesthetic” form of awe is distinguished by our approach to it or way of interacting with the object or event. In the latter sense, “aesthetic” indicates a particular mode of engagement with the respective objects. Due to its status as an “aesthetic” experience, aesthetic awe can be more easily switched off than can fundamental emotions such as fear (Konečni 2005 and 2011). If we now add Shapshay’s notions of the thick and the thin sublime, this conceptual relation can be represented by figure 1.

Of course, this brings us back to the thorny question of aesthetic experience. In referring to the experience of the sublime as an aesthetic experience, I refer to the perceptual-sensory, cognitive, and emotional-affective responses to objects engaged with or attended to with absorbed attention (or, if one prefers, disinterestedness or distancing), which are carried out in order to be in that state of absorbed attention, a pleasant state which is self-reinforcing, or one in which one wants to remain and stay engaged. The object of the aesthetic experience can be left open: natural, artefactual, artistic, conceptual, everyday. The aesthetic, then, is here thought to involve a particular kind of stance toward, or mode of interaction with, a particular object or event.

On this view (following Otto and Quinn), one can have aesthetic experiences of the divine or of religious rituals: the fact that such experiences are responses to the divine or the gods does not make them necessarily and a fortiori religious. This is true mutatis mutandis for other kinds of objects. As Quinn puts it, “One can respond to such things [starry heavens, human artifacts, heroism] with religious awe, but one’s response to them can involve awe without being dependent on religious belief” (1997, 292) (where religious belief, for Quinn, concerns the transcendent and contains a salvific, liberating dimension).

I offer two more examples. Being emotionally moved by a funeral or wedding has been called a “prosocial attachment” emotion. But if our focus is on the formal choreography (the beauty or dignity of songs and speeches, etc.) of the funeral or wedding, “then the attribute moving includes a dimension of aesthetic appreciation” (Menninghaus et al. 2020, 651). Or, second, it seems possible to have aesthetic experiences of a political rally or protest even though the latter has non-aesthetic aims. In such experiences, one can attend to the bright colors, inspiring sounds, the look and smell of smoke, the uses of symbolization, the wit displayed on the signs, or the colorfully adorned people carrying them.

As aesthetic awe, the experience of the sublime is not supposed to give us deep metaphysical insight, at least no insight beyond the one created by the imagination and the interactions between perception and imagination. In other words, the proposed view does not see the sublime as a failed

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** The experience of the sublime as aesthetic awe.
mode of understanding (cf. Forsey 2007). To do so would be to make the false assumption that the experience of the sublime is at heart an epistemological issue, a matter of truth and knowledge. Instead, the sublime is here thought of more as a matter of aesthetic play and sensory perception (and perhaps cognitive reflection, in cases of the thick sublime) than of truth and adequation to reality. It is possible that one might make some connection with truth, downstream as it were, but the sublime is best conceived without direct reference to truth and knowledge.

There are two additional points in favor of the seventh view. First, it accounts for many of the similarities and areas of overlap between the experience of the sublime and awe that were noted under III.C. After all, a species overlaps with its genus in some respects. Second, conceiving of the sublime as aesthetic awe also makes sense of the apparent differences between awe and the sublime. If the sublime is only a kind of awe, the sublime cannot simply be identified with awe: a species differs in some respects from its genus (hence III.B above was rejected).

IV. FEAR AND AN ALLEGED “THREAT-BASED” VARIANT

One of the reasons for rejecting options four (III.D) and five (III.E) hinged on the absence of a purely negative form of awe or the experience of the sublime. In other words, it is doubtful that a negative, threat-based variant could count as an aesthetic experience.

It seems that theorists here have a choice between two alternatives. One option would be to recognize two varieties of the experience of the sublime: a positive one and a negative, threat-based one. Pelowski and colleagues identify (albeit somewhat tentatively) a negative variety of the sublime (“class 2”) (Pelowski et al. 2021).

This variety seems analogous to the threat-based awe proposed by Gordon and colleagues (2017). They introduce the notion of a threat-based awe, a negative experience in which fear is a major component. On this view, awe contains a fear component (Gordon et al. 2017).

One problem with the view that there is a negative variant of the experience of the sublime is that the fear component has been (and still is) disputed in the psychological research. For instance, Ishizu and Zeki (2014), based on the Burian account of the experience of the sublime, expected to find activation in brain areas typically associated with the experience of fear and threat such as the amygdala and the insula. But they write, “results did not show any activity in brain areas such as the amygdala and the insula, which have been associated with the experience of fear and threat” (2014, 7). Although some researchers claim that the experience of the sublime contains a fear component (Eskine et al. 2012; Ortlieb, Fischer, and Carbon 2016), recent work by Hur, Pelowski, and colleagues raises questions about the presence of such a fear component (Hur et al. 2020; Pelowski et al. 2021, 14). Notably, Hur and colleagues (2020) found no physiological evidence (using facial electromyography) linking sublimity ratings with physiological markers of fear.

The second option seems more promising on both empirical and conceptual grounds. This option views only the positive variant as an instance of the experience of the sublime. The threat-based kind would then be a mode of fear, and it would be “interested” (in the traditional, post-Kantian sense) rather than a disinterested, aesthetic experience. Pelowski and colleagues speculate—in my view plausibly—that the negative variety of the experience of the sublime (“class 2”) might simply have been created by noise in their data. “One interpretation could be that the Class 2 should be treated as noise, with a small subset of participants (only 22) reporting something other than a ‘sublime’ account” (Pelowski et al. 2021, 20). It is indeed difficult to see how, if participants are feeling a high degree of actual fear, they can still have an aesthetic experience. Of course, how one makes this choice is greatly affected by how one views the nature of the “aesthetic” and whether or not one accepts the proposed understanding of “aesthetic experience” as a particular mode of interacting and engagement with objects and events.

In the conceptual framework here adopted, people who have the experience of the sublime feel or think (at least implicitly) that they are in a position of existential safety (whether or not—as in the case of hurricane chasers—they are actually safe is another matter). Real, present fear, on this view, is not a component of the sublime and is incompatible with it. Lack of fear and perceived existential safety are prerequisites of having an aesthetic experience of the sublime. Significantly, in the study by
Pelowski and colleagues (2021), there were lower levels of the sublime when experiencing the negative variant. The fact that participants reported actual fear may explain why: the presence of fear gets in the way of the aesthetic experience of the sublime.4

How, then, should we understand these references to a negative variant? Calling the experience “threat-based” at most picks out the fact that the stimulus is potentially fearsome or frightening. But if the experience itself is truly negative, it is hard to see how it could be an experience of the sublime or aesthetic awe.

The proposed approach is well represented throughout the history of aesthetics and literature on the sublime. As we have seen, Seward thought that the experience of the sublime requires awareness of safety: “the consciousness of protection” is a necessary condition of the experience of the sublime. For Kant too, the person feeling the sublime must be in a disinterested mindset and cannot feel actual fear during the experience of the sublime. To experience the sublime, Kant states, we must “find ourselves in [a position of] safety” (2019a, 134). Although the powerful object eliciting the experience of the (dynamical) sublime is “fearful,” we are not (in the experience of the sublime) actually afraid of it. “We can, however, consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it” (134). A few lines later Kant clarifies: “In our aesthetic judgment nature is judged as sublime not insofar as it arouses fear, but rather because it calls forth our power . . . to regard those things about which we are concerned (goods, health and life) as trivial” (134–5). And at the end of section §28 of the Critique of Judgment, Kant states that in the experience of the sublime we exercise our capacity for “judging nature without fear” (134). Even Burke, too, holds that any “danger or pain” in the fearsome object must be felt at a certain distance and “with certain modifications” (2019, 79). Burke states, “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (79). Wordsworth likewise writes, “But if personal fear be strained beyond a certain point, this sensation [of the sublime] is destroyed” (2019, 180). For Konečni, too, a crucial requirement of aesthetic awe is perceived existential security (2011, 65). In short, lack of fear or perceived existential safety have long been seen as part of the conceptualization of the sublime, and, if the proposed view is correct, rightly so.

V. FINAL REMARKS

Given the foregoing argument by elimination, it seems best to conceive of the sublime as aesthetic awe.

Ideally, this article has helped forge a bridge between the psychology of awe and the philosophy of the sublime. Psychologists interested in awe might learn from the philosophical literature on the sublime and continue to draw from it, as they have recently begun to do. In turn, if the sublime is a kind of awe, philosophers can profit from the empirical literature on awe in proposing their theories and conceptual analyses of the sublime.

Needless to say, I have not here attempted to flesh out a proper or complete theory of the sublime as aesthetic awe. Many topics would have to be explored in order to do that, including but not limited to: whether the experience of the sublime is best considered to be, not simply a feeling and experience (as I have done here), but also as an emotion; the sublime’s relation to other feelings such as beauty and wonder as well as to negative experiences such as the responses to the ugly and grotesque; the roles of imagination and cognition; the extent to which the experience of the sublime involves explicitly self-directed attention; the features of the elicitors, especially artistic and natural ones; and the sublime’s relation to truth, belief, and knowledge.

Finally, we might explore the experience of the sublime’s cross-cultural commonality—even while recognizing the historical particularity of its cultural expressions. That the sublime is a “commonly felt experience” has some empirical support (Pelowski et al. 2021, 19), and related feelings such as being moved (kama muta) seem to be cross-cultural (Zickfeld et al. 2019, 404). As Paul Crowther puts it, though the sublime can be instantiated differently under various historical conditions, it appears that “the same cognitive structure . . . is at issue in each of them” (2016, 166). It would be worthwhile to explore how a common capacity or disposition to experience the sublime is triggered by various elicitors, as well as the possibly divergent ways in which the experience of the sublime is expressed and de-
veloped in specific cultures. Needless to say, cross-cultural investigations need not be quantitative, but could also be text-based and adopt the methods of literature studies. For instance, we might examine the ancient or premodern texts of China, Japan, or India to see if or how, before exposure to European ideas about the topic, the writings discuss experiences of the sublime.

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**END NOTES**

1. The absence of such “consciousness of protection,” and the presence of actual fear in the face of “danger,” make it difficult to experience the sublime. I return to the role of fear in section IV below.

2. Let us entertain my hypothetically meeting Roger Federer in person—speaking with him or even playing tennis with him. As an avid tennis player, I think I might (at least in the first few minutes) feel something bordering on awe when interacting with this widely respected, world-class athlete, an experience of what might be called “social” awe, given Federer’s standing in the hierarchy of tennis and in sport (in 2020, he was the highest paid athlete in the world). But I doubt that I would experience our hypothetical encounter from an aesthetic point of view. Luckily, however, I once had an aesthetic experience of watching Federer play: seeing him in action at the US Open in the packed Billy Jean King National Tennis Center, indeed, sometimes evoked experiences of the sublime. There were moments in which I took in the “pop” of the strokes (especially the serve), the speed of the ball (hardly captured by television), the apparent effortlessness of Federer’s movements, as well as the roar of the crowd, the foghorn blasts, the red-and-white Swiss flags, the banners and signs, painted faces, and the momentous setting. In “Roger Federer as Religious Experience,” David Foster Wallace makes points along these lines. But, despite the article’s title, Wallace is not really claiming that the Swiss athlete is a religious phenomenon. Rather, he is saying that watching Federer sometimes amounted to an aesthetic experience. Wallace writes of the “spectator experience” of watching Federer and of “aesthetic stuff.” He views unique “Federer moments” as experiences of “beauty” and describes Federer’s “grace” and “consummate finesse.” He reports witnessing “the beauty and genius of his game” (2006). Though Wallace could have emphasized the sublime more, at least he views the experience as an aesthetic one (rather than as religious or social awe), which is why I use this example.

3. A similar contrast between the perceptual and the conceptual elements of the sublime has been recognized by Pelowski and colleagues (2021). This seems to add some initial empirical support to Shapshay’s distinction between the more minimal, sensory-perceptory (thin) and reflective, cognitive (thick) varieties of the sublime.
Kant distinguishes between *Erhabene* (sublime) and *Ehrfurcht* (reverential fear or awe), which contains the root “fear” (*Furcht*). Incidentally, the roots of *Ehrfurcht* make it difficult to operationalize empirical studies of awe in German. If *Ehrfurcht* is used in prompts, there is a tendency for participants to focus on the “fear” hinted at by the word.

For instance, Konečni holds that “the sublime always includes ... beauty” and he views beauty as one of the sublime’s “obligatory components” (2005, 28). Those who conceive of the sublime as containing beauty as a component, it should be noted, differ from many prominent authors in the philosophical tradition, who, moreover, come from different periods (e.g., Dennis, Kant, Schiller, Schopenhauer, Lyotard, Danto).

There is considerable disagreement in the theoretical and empirical literature concerning whether people feel more (rather than less) significant during the experience of the sublime, and whether they reflect on themselves consciously and direct attention at themselves. Unfortunately, the empirical research is here insufficiently clear about the concept and role of a sense of *self-loss* as opposed to *self-awareness* (reflexivity), which are not necessarily coextensive.

A recent study using virtual reality to investigate van Gogh’s *Starry Night* as compared with a video of an actual starry night reports that both painting and the natural panorama are equally potent, effective elicitors of the sublime (Chirico et al. 2020). Interestingly, however, the natural panorama gives more of an impression of “vastness” and it creates a relatively greater “perception of existential danger.” Another study (Pelowski et al. 2021) indicates that there is a wide variety of elicitors of the experience of the sublime—in fact, the authors note that nearly all of the stimuli that have been put forward throughout the history of the sublime are represented. These results suggest that we should be open minded or pluralistic about the potential elicitors of the experience of the sublime.

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