

## Awe:

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# **Awe:**

## **An Aristotelian analysis of a non-Aristotelian virtuous emotion**

Kristján Kristjánsson

**Abstract:** While interest in the emotion of awe has surged in psychology (especially positive psychology), philosophers have yet to devote a single self-standing article to awe's conceptual contours and moral standing. The present article aims to rectify this imbalance and begin to make up for the unwarranted philosophical neglect. In order to do so, awe is given the standard Aristotelian treatment to uncover its conceptual contours and moral relevance. Aristotelianism typically provides the most useful entry point to 'size up' any emotion – more problematically here, however, as Aristotle did not himself explicitly identify awe. The article critiques and proposes to improve upon existing psychological conceptual analyses of awe, probes the question why Aristotle ignored it and addresses an often-presumed link between awe and humility which bears on its moral status.

**Keywords:** awe; conceptual analysis; Aristotle; humility; moral worth

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## 1. Introduction: Psychological Enthusiasm – Philosophical Silence

The whole law of human existence consists in nothing other than a man's always being able to bow before the immeasurably great. If people are deprived of the immeasurably great, they will not live and will die in despair (Dostoevsky 1994, p. 664).

The last decade has seen a surge of interest among psychologists in the emotion of *awe*. A landmark paper published in 2003 began with the evocative sentence: 'In the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear is a little studied emotion – awe' (Keltner & Haidt 2003, p. 297). Little more than a decade later, however, awe is riveting attention, especially within the field of positive psychology. This sudden shift in interest is particularly noteworthy for having taken place in an era often identified with a disenchanted, technocratic stance: of a 'buffered self', increasingly oblivious of and apathetic to experiences of emotional 'excess' such as those associated with awe (see e.g. Taylor 2007). Postmodernism has even made a positive virtue out of shallowness and lack of emotional intensity. One might wonder who has patience nowadays to follow Einstein in pausing 'to stand rapt in awe' at the mysteries of existence (cited in Shiota, Keltner & Mossman 2007, p. 944).

While interest in awe has swept through psychology with the speed of Chinese whispers, philosophical watchdogs, who usually bark when something new is afoot in psychology, have mostly remained mute. Although awe has been mentioned sporadically in philosophical analyses of emotion (see esp. Roberts 2003, pp. 269–270), and is often referred to in aesthetics, philosophy of religion and environmental ethics, a literature search failed to locate a single self-standing philosophical paper devoted to awe, either an analysis of the concept or

an evaluation of the moral worth of the emotion.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the present article is to rectify this imbalance and begin to make up for the unwarranted philosophical neglect.

As could be expected, given the dominant paradigm of predictivism in academic (including positive) psychology, most of the research published on awe has aimed at establishing correlative or causal links between the emotion and (other) positive variables. We have learned how awe is associated with subjective well-being; psychological growth and transformation; lessened existential despair; Big-Five traits of openness and extraversion; love of learning; gratitude; spiritual motivations (among the religious); even lower levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines – and with a distinct, universally recognised facial expression (see e.g. Shiota, Keltner & Mossman 2007; Bonner & Friedman 2011; Van Cappellen & Saroglou 2012; Stellar et al. 2015). Some of those correlations have taken us into the moral sphere, where awe has been shown to be associated with enhanced ethical decision-making, generosity and prosocial values (Piff et al. 2015), possibly having to do with awe's capacity to bind the individual with broader social entities (Van Cappellen & Saroglou 2012).

It is a cause for concern and surprise, however, that these findings have not yet registered on philosophical radars, especially given their potential resonance with one of the most famous philosophical quotations ever: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect upon them; the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me' (Kant 1993, p. 169). We have not witnessed the same windfall for the emotion of awe as for, say, the emotions of jealousy and gratitude, in the form of a watershed philosophical analysis (Farrell 1980; Roberts 2004) which sets the tone for any further conceptual dissections. That is a pity, for academic

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<sup>1</sup> Some interesting studies of the related emotion of wonder have appeared recently, however, see e.g. Vasalou (2015); Tobia (2015). I mention the latter study briefly below.

progress in the study of emotions seems to pick up pace when social scientists and philosophers start to talk across disciplinary boundaries.

All that said, it is not as if psychologists have done completely without conceptual accounts of awe. Left to their own devices, in default of philosophical analyses, they have simply carried those out themselves (Keltner & Haidt 2003; Bonner & Friedman 2011), with the first of the two having achieved something of a canonical status in the field. However, whereas conceptual analyses are the philosopher's stock-in-trade, this is a method where psychologists are not as sure footed. A diplomatic way to state this concern is to say that just as psychologists would have reason to be suspicious if the only existing empirical studies of an emotion had been conducted from the philosophical armchair, philosophers have reason to raise eyebrows if all existing conceptual analyses have been performed by empirically minded psychologists. As it happens, this concern is corroborated in Section 2, in which neither of the existing analyses of awe passes muster.

The time has come to offer a philosophical analysis of the conceptual contours and the moral standing of awe by giving it a standard Aristotelian treatment. In Section 2, I critique and propose to improve upon existing conceptual analyses of awe. Section 3 addresses the concern that Aristotle himself does not seem to have been interested in awe, or considered it part of the good life. Section 4 explores an often-presumed link between awe and humility, which bears on its moral status. Section 5, finally, offers some concluding remarks. The reader may ask, however, why I equate the aims of those sections with an 'Aristotelian treatment'. The short answer is that the best recent philosophical explorations of emotions – in particular emotions that constitute putatively virtuous traits – have been done within the field of virtue ethics in general and Aristotelian virtue ethics in particular (cf. Kristjánsson

2007). Indeed, the unique capacity of Aristotelian virtue ethics to accommodate the salience of emotions may be one of the reasons why many people are drawn to it in the first place. A slightly longer answer is that Aristotelianism has at least five different assets which render it apt to make sense of the conceptual and moral contours of an emotion such as awe: (1) It can potentially place it within a general account of the good life *qua* flourishing (*eudaimonia*); (2) it can explain not only the instrumental but also the intrinsic value of virtuous emotions; (3) it can analyse virtuous emotions along the lines of the helpful golden-mean architectonic; (4) it can account for the logical structure/components of emotions and their close interrelationships; and (5) it can offer salient advice on the education of morally valuable emotions.

Accommodating awe within an Aristotelian system, as I propose to do, is a tall order, however. Not only did Aristotle fail to identify or evaluate awe as an emotion, he seems to have refrained from acknowledging the broader category of transpersonal emotions to which awe belongs. Moreover, recent attempts to forge a link between awe and humility will arouse suspicion among Aristotelian scholars, who tend to see humility as a vice. I will need to assuage those worries in what follows. Meanwhile, I stick to the working hypothesis that an ‘Aristotelian treatment’ is exactly what awe needs at the moment to give it the required philosophical gravitas.

## **2. The Concept of Awe**

Etymology seldom gets us very far in conceptual analysis. Nevertheless, it is instructive to note that the word ‘awe’ is thought to be derived from the Old Norse word ‘agi’ (terror, dread), a word which exists in contemporary Icelandic in permutations such as ‘ægilegur’

(terrifying). Over the centuries, however, the centre of gravity in ‘awe’ moved from the terrifying to the fantastic, probably hand in hand with a decreased fear of supernatural powers. Yet a slight hint of underlying terror may still remain in the term in some locutions, which makes awe less than exclusively ‘positive’ an emotion in terms of valence.

Ostensive definitions often constitute a helpful entry point to conceptual analyses. Václav Havel, the late Czech writer and statesman, once reminisced on a day when, languishing as a dissident in prison, he began to gaze into the crown of an enormous tree that rose up and over the prison fences: ‘As I watched the imperceptible tremblings of its leaves against the endless sky, I was overcome by a sensation that is difficult to describe: all at once, I seemed to rise above all the coordinates of my momentary existence in the world into a kind of state outside time in which all the beautiful things I have ever seen and experienced existed in total “co-present”’. Havel continues to describe the characteristics of this beatific experience as those of reconciliation and elation (cited in Taylor 2007, p. 728). I submit that however we specify awe, it must at least capture some of the essential features of Havel’s experience: those of elevation, the spontaneous overflow of feelings, heightened awareness, transcendence (of ordinary objects of experience), sense of unity, etc. Another instructive starting point is to engage in introspection: to identify personal episodes that one would require any workable definition of awe to cover. Here are three from my own life.

(1) I first visited Hljóðaklettur – a well-known area of columnar-craters, presenting unique ‘basalt roses’, in a national park in the north-east of Iceland – on an early October day as a 17-year old. All the tourists had gone, there was not a single person in sight; only the ‘rosy’ columns surrounded by low birch trees in autumn colours, with a mighty grey glacial river providing a stark background contrast. I experienced feelings of aesthetic

ecstasy, mingled with a sense of enormity, oneness and of time standing still. I have never been fully able to recapture that feeling, there or elsewhere, although I have caught glimpses of it when listening to great pieces of music such as Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto.

(2) During a gap year as a 20-year old, I unwisely took up a job as a high-school teacher. Having to teach seriously disruptive students without being prepared to do so through either experience or training, this one-year of work stretched my mental and physical resources towards breaking point. I was basically at my wits' end. My father watched my gradual mental deterioration from close by but without being able to do anything substantial to remedy the situation. Probably out of a sense of despair, more than anything else, he bought me an expensive watch. When he passed it on to me, without saying a word, I immediately sensed what had happened. I felt an overpowering sense of elevation – not so much in the form of moral admiration at my father's gesture or a desire to want to emulate him as a moral exemplar (although those emotions featured also), but rather by way of intense appreciation that such depth of goodness could exist in the world. At the philosophical risk of 'having one thought too many', my most profound emotion was thus directed at the ideal of moral goodness rather than at my father as a person.

(3) When watching a Horizon documentary on BBC about the concept of infinity, I felt as if I had entered a magic kingdom. Covering topics such as those of possible parallel worlds, the mystery of the singularity of a black hole and the prospects of an endless array of universes, this documentary truly enthralled me. I felt intellectually elevated, spirited up to a transcendent reality where I existed as an ineluctable part of a great chain of being. I recorded the programme and have watched it again and again, each time reliving some of the emotion of the first viewing but never taken again to the same experiential heights.

Let me hypothesise that what these three experiences had in common was the single emotion of awe, but targeting the different ideals of beauty, goodness and truth, respectively. Working on that assumption, I will make it a condition of any plausible characterisation of awe that it can account for those experiences as experiences of awe. Starting from paradigmatic examples of this kind, philosophers then typically proceed towards a more rigorous unpacking of the concept. There is no space here to describe the ‘standard philosophical method’ in detail – if there is a standard method – as the general moves will be familiar to most readers (cf. Roberts, 2003, chap. 1), but we could call it a method of ‘critical conceptual revision’. Philosophers subject existing conceptions to critical scrutiny and – by trimming the ragged edges of ordinary language – try to distil a definition that makes sense of the general geography of the relevant term and its surroundings, and is serviceable both for theoretical and practical purposes. Deep down, I suspect many philosophical conceptual analysts harbour concerns that their tightening and regimenting work sets ordinary usage in the end at naught, or at least prioritises the views of ‘the Wise’ over those of ‘the Many’. This is why philosophers sometimes look with envy at what they presume to be the natural first step of a social scientific exploration of concepts: namely, scientifically tracking lay conceptions. As it happens, however, the presumption that this is the ordinary ‘first step’ in social science is somewhat misplaced.

Consider the two earlier-mentioned conceptual analyses done by psychologists that inform the field of awe studies, the first one of which (Keltner & Haidt 2003) has set the stage for a large portion of the subsequent research literature. Keltner and Haidt ‘approach awe from a prototype perspective’ (2003, p. 303). Prototype analysis is a well-known social scientific method to gauge lay people’s understandings of terms. A sizeable group of

participants are then taken through a number of rigorous stages which gradually project a picture of the geography of the term and its surroundings, by ascertaining which terms and phrases are central to the understanding of the term under scrutiny and which are less so (see Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjánsson 2014, for a detailed description). Prototype analyses may be criticised for failing to distinguish between understandings that constitute necessary conditions of the application of the relevant term and understandings that typically circle around it, so to speak, without informing its core content. Nevertheless, the method of prototype analysis is a good bet if one wants to perform an initial study of how a certain term features in the public consciousness.

The problem with Keltner and Haidt's method of conceptual analysis – from a social scientific perspective more than a philosophical one – is that although they adopt a prototype perspective, they do not perform an actual prototype analysis. In fact, they do not survey the views of anyone except themselves. Their method is, therefore, far from being social scientific 'all the way down' (to the level of general lay conceptions). In assuming, rather than investigating, the prototype structure of awe, it is simply an exercise in armchair psychology. It may seem like a case of the pot calling the kettle black for philosophers to complain about conceptual analyses performed from the armchair. However, philosophers at least follow a long tradition of regimenting terms logically through a set of explicit criteria, of conceptual clarity, economy and coherence, by working through a series of examples and counter-examples (typically derived from literary sources or presumed ordinary-language use rather than just from philosophical colleagues), and they make no claims to their method being social scientific. Keltner and Haidt admit to having developed their prototype approach 'with some trepidation, in the absence of empirical evidence' (2003, p. 311). But

that admission leaves the question of why they, as social scientists, did not make a stab at producing some empirical evidence to get their conceptual analysis off the ground.

Bonner and Friedman (2011) apply the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis to their study of the concept of awe. Again, the method they choose has a long history (which is not to say that it is uncontroversial). As is usual in this method, Bonner and Friedman consider individual agents to be experts on their own experience; the role of the researcher is simply to help map out the meaning of this experience by distilling common themes that emerge from the experience of a group of people and systematising those as far as possible. Surprisingly, however, Bonner and Friedman did not conduct any phenomenological interviews themselves; rather they decided to rely upon the analysis of semi-structured interviews on awe in a book published two years earlier (Schneider 2009); hence, basically interpreting an already existing interpretation. Apart from seeming a lazy way to conduct social science research, using archival rather than original data means that much of the immediacy and urgency of the message that the participants were conveying in the interviews will be lost on the analysts, through lack of personal rapport. Interpretative phenomenological analysis aspires to the bold ideal of merging horizons of meaning between the researcher and the participants. The common choice of the word ‘co-researcher’ for participants reveals the level of the symbiosis of souls aimed for in such analysis. It seems odd that Bonner and Friedman decided to foreclose the avenue of personal acquaintance (and the possibility of additional questioning), so crucial to the aim of the merging of meaning, by relying on already conducted interviews rather than live ones.

The aim of those comments is not to do a methodological hatchet job on the two ‘social scientific’ conceptual analyses. From a philosophical perspective, the authors in question

deserve credit for refusing to rush into ‘measuring’ awe through simplistic self-report questionnaires (with items such as ‘I often feel awe’, as seems to be the standard practice; see e.g. Shiota, Keltner & Mossman 2007, p. 956) before establishing what the concept of awe actually means to people. They also deserve credit – from the perspective of *most* philosophers at least – for tacitly assuming a cognitive theory of emotions, according to which emotions are individuated essentially on the grounds of cognitions, rather than just feelings or perceptions. Furthermore, a tree is best known by its fruit; it could well be that the proposals the analysts have come up with do carry benefits although those may not have been arrived at via what would be understood as rigorous social scientific standards.

Keltner and Haidt (2003) suggest that two appraisals are prototypically central to awe: *perception of vastness* and a *need for accommodation*. To elaborate, vastness can involve physical or social ‘size’: in fact, ‘anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference’ (2003, p. 303). Accommodation ‘refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience’; it involves confusion and obscurity to begin with and then a realignment of structures if everything goes well (2003, p. 304). These two appraisals are central in the sense that emotional experiences that lack one of them cannot be called ‘awe’. For example, accommodation without vastness produces *surprise*; vastness without accommodation produces *deference*. In philosophical jargon, those are then the *necessary conditions* of awe. This way of speaking indicates, however, that ‘prototype structure’ means something else for the authors than ‘being amenable to prototype analysis’, for prototype analysis is typically critiqued, as already mentioned, for failing to identify necessary conditions. In addition to their two necessary conditions, Keltner and Haidt

suggest five additional themes that may alter or ‘flavour’ awe experiences: perceptions of threat, beauty, exceptional ability, virtue/strength of character and presumed supernatural causality (2003, pp. 304–306). One more feature of awe typically gets a mention in research relying on Keltner and Haidt’s original model – diminishment of the individual self (see e.g. Piff et al. 2015). However, that factor tends to be understood as an empirical result of awe, rather than part of the awe concept, although the distinction between the two may not always be perfectly clear (see Section 4).

Despite the popularity of the Keltner and Haidt conceptual model, Bonner and Friedman claim that awe ‘still lacks a consensual scientific meaning’ (2011, p. 222). Their interpretative phenomenological analysis resulted in the identification of 10 themes relating to participants’ varied experiences of awe: profoundness, connectedness (to something larger than the self), the numinous (referring to the perceived presence of something ‘holy’), fear, vastness, existential awareness, openness/acceptance, ineffable wonder, presence (as the effect of halting the ordinary flow of mental chatter) and heightened perception (2011, pp. 226–230). It is difficult to compare this analysis with that of Keltner and Haidt. For one thing, as is the wont of phenomenology, it does not come up with necessary conditions. Even if we just focus on a comparison of the additional themes in Keltner and Haidt with the 10 themes elicited here, their foci are different, with the former focusing more on the *sources* of the emotion but the latter on the *qualities* of its experience. Hence, these themes might be seen as complementary rather than competing.

In terms of a substantive critique, it seems odd that one of the two necessary conditions in Keltner and Haidt’s model is a *process* – set in place by awe – rather than an *appraisal* incorporated in the emotion. What awe may do to existing mental structures is salient, but it

is not a cognition on a par with ‘vastness’. Furthermore, although awe does, no doubt, in some cases call for the readjustment of mental structures, it may, arguably, in other cases simply confirm or reinforce existing structures, for example ones created by earlier experiences of awe directed at similar targets.

Regarding the vastness condition, I think two distinctions would have been helpful. One is between vastness and greatness. Awe is scarcely elicited by the mere recognition that something is vast (in scope or in depth), but rather that this vastness is somehow ‘immeasurably great’ (Dostoevsky 1994, p. 664) or fantastic. The sheer vastness of the number of grains in a pile of sand, or of molecules in a human body, would not normally be a cause for awe; something must be seen to elevate the mere vastness to greatness. Second, a distinction should be made between vastness/greatness, perceived to reside in individuals, and vastness/greatness as an abstract ideal. As Keltner and Haidt themselves correctly acknowledge, awe must be distinguished from emotions such as gratitude, admiration and love (2003, p. 311). We may *admire* a person for the greatness of virtue, but that is different from *awe* which is directed at, so to speak, the vastness/greatness of the goodness of virtue itself. A heightened form of personal admiration is *reverence*, which Roberts helpfully characterises as an ‘acknowledging subjective response to something excellent in a personal (moral or spiritual) way’ (Roberts 2003, p. 268).<sup>2</sup> If the reverence focuses, however, on excellence in an impersonal way, it turns into (moral) elevation, which I specify below as one of the three main variants of awe. Regarding Bonner and Friedman’s model, I believe they have identified features of awe that Keltner and Haidt missed, regarding perceptions of profoundness (*qua* greatness), connectedness, existential awareness and ineffability.

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<sup>2</sup> Reverence for a person (human or divine) is sometimes described as ‘awe’ (see e.g. Krause & Hayward 2015, on ‘awe of God’), but I find that an infelicitous extension.

However, the message they convey is somewhat compromised by of the ambiguity of the term ‘theme’ in phenomenological analyses, covering anything from potential logical conditions to frequent connotations.

Although there is some illumination to be gained from both the existing conceptual analyses, neither of them seems to be quite the done deal. It is a pity that neither party elicits insights from Maslow’s (1964) interviews with hundreds of people about their ‘peak experiences’ which clearly involve awe (Keltner & Haidt 2003, p. 302 only mention those in passing). It might also have been beneficial to draw upon Kant’s notion of *the sublime*, especially his observations on how the special attraction of the sublime lies in an awareness of the formal features of the object and its perceived unboundedness.<sup>3</sup> Last but not least, of historical figures, Plato can always be counted upon for enlightenment when we speculate what it is like to venture out of the ‘cave’ of ordinary experiences and glimpse the ‘sunlight’ outside (cf. Murdoch 1970 and Chappell 2014 for ‘demythologised’ interpretations). Robert C. Roberts captures some elements of awe that seem to be missing in the two existing psychological analyses – although he does not profess to draw upon any social scientifically examined views of ‘the Many’, as distinct from his own conceptual insights. Roberts suggests the following defining proposition of awe: ‘Greatness of kind Y is important and X exhibits a surpassing greatness of kind Y’ (2003, p. 270). This propositional form indicates that awe involves a triadic relationship between the experiencing subject, an experience of the form X and an ideal value of form Y, of which X is seen as an instantiation. Furthermore, Roberts observes correctly that the greatness perceived in awe is neutral with respect to morality and spirituality; awe is, for example, ‘a fitting response to the destructive

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<sup>3</sup> There is obviously a large literature in philosophical aesthetics that explores Kant’s notion of the sublime, and some of that literature would be relevant for the analysis offered in this article (see e.g. Ivanhoe 1997). For reasons of space, however, I leave Kant out of further consideration here.

power of the hydrogen bomb' (2003, p. 269) as much as to the greatness of moral ideals. Fittingness is not, however, the same as moral justifiability.

Drawing on those additional insights, the ostensive definitions adduced earlier and the two existing analyses, I propose the following characterisation of awe, organised via the standard parameters of an Aristotelian emotion: (1) The *subject* of awe is the person experiencing it. (2) The *feeling* of awe is intense and predominantly pleasant although it may be slightly tainted with a sense of impending terror. The perception associated with the feeling can be visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile (Ivanhoe 1997, p. 112). (3) The *object* of awe is captured by the cognition that the subject is experiencing or has experienced an instantiation of a truly great ideal that is mystifying or even ineffable in transcending ordinary human experiences. This experience is perceived to have increased existential awareness and connected the subject to a greater whole. To put it technically, this means that – contrary to Keltner and Haidt – awe constitutes an essentially self-reflexive experience (cf. Sundararjan 2002). (4) The *target* of awe is constituted by the ideals of the famous Platonic triad of truth, beauty and goodness (while truth and beauty may be instantiated in amoral or immoral ways). Depending on whether the target is truth, beauty or goodness, awe presents itself as the more specific emotions of *intellectual elevation* (for truth), *moral elevation* (for goodness) or *aesthetic ecstasy* (for beauty). Awe can thus be seen as a term for a general emotional cluster, just as Aristotle's *nemesis* (poetic justice) is a name for the general emotional cluster of feeling pain at undeserved fortune/misfortune and pleasure at deserved fortune/misfortune, but the *nemesis*-family then presents itself as a more distinct emotion (for example compassion or righteous indignation) in specific instances (see Kristjánsson 2006, chap. 3). (5) The characteristic *desire* in awe is that of continuing to experience the

emotion or experiencing it again, preferably more profoundly. (6) Awe does not, however, present itself with a distinct *behavioural pattern*, apart (possibly) from a common facial expression of blissful surprise.

I present (1)–(5) above as *necessary and sufficient conditions* for an experience of awe to take place. This formulation does not mean that the concept of awe is specifiable with mathematical precision. Awe, like all emotion concepts, is open-textured and with vague boundaries. This vagueness is not, however, a result of the unavailability of relevant necessary conditions; it is rather a result of those conditions themselves being vague. For example, it is impossible to define with any mathematical precision the exact dividing line between mere wonder at a remarkable natural phenomenon, like the rainbow, and awe at a unique appearance of a rainbow which is somehow connected to a heightened existential awareness. *Wonder* often seems to function as a gentle and low-level relative of awe (and its common precursor), with awe, then, best being described as intensification of wonder; yet it may be impossible to determine exactly at what point wonder shades into awe proper. Moreover, a careful study of lay uses of the words ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’ complicates this simple picture somewhat (Darbor et al. 2015). It indicates that whereas ‘wonder’ is associated with curiosity in trying to understand the world and contemplate its workings, awe is more related to observing it existentially – reflected in greater use of perception words. Incidentally, this distinction between lay uses of the two emotion concepts corresponds substantially to a specification already suggested by Nussbaum (2001, p. 54), according to which wonder focuses on the value of the object, and is most likely to issue in contemplation but, contra awe, without self-reflexivity (i.e. with the subject being ‘minimally aware, if at all, of its relationship to her own plans’).

Recently – in contrast to the eerie philosophical silence on the contours of awe – a number of conceptual analyses of *wonder* have appeared, conducted by philosophers. For instance, Tobia (2015) provides an exhaustive list of the necessary and sufficient conditions for experiencing wonder. Much of his rhetoric seems to indicate a strong affinity between wonder and awe, as he also connects experiences of wonder to a sense of mystery and immensity. Yet he specifically singles out two distinctions between awe and wonder, one having to do with wonder being positively valenced while experiences of awe can be entirely negatively valenced; the other based on the observation that, unlike wonder, awe does not require interest in the object (2015, footnote 4). I doubt that experiences of awe can be entirely negative. However, even if wonder and awe can be placed differently on the valence spectrum, I would follow Aristotle in seeing emotions being set apart by their cognitive consorts rather than their valence.<sup>4</sup> Tobia is right, however, in that awe does not require *interest* in the experienced object, if by ‘interest’ he means ‘enduring intellectual interest’. It suffices that the object of awe captivates us momentarily. Tobia also draws on Nussbaum’s above-mentioned point about wonder being non-self-reflexive, or more specifically what they call ‘non-eudaimonistic’; again he is right that wonder may be experienced independent of, and without impacting, our personal projects or our existential awareness. It is often experienced as non-self-conscious ‘flow’, whereas awe prompts us to self-consciously re-evaluate our status in the universe.

However we decide in the end to drive a conceptual wedge between awe and wonder, I consider the characterisation of awe proposed above to mark an improvement over previous analyses and to smooth away some of the touselled edges of what I take to be unsystemic

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Aristotle seems to have considered most emotion types to be of mixed valence rather than entirely ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (see Kristjánsson 2007).

ordinary-language uses of the concept. Yet, as the conceptual contours of awe have mostly eluded philosophical exploration to date, I present the above characterisation as work in progress and as ‘fair game’ for critique and further elaboration.

### **3. Towards an Aristotelian Justification of a Non-Aristotelian Emotion Virtue**

When the discussion turns to the moral worth of emotions, Aristotle is again the first obvious port of call. A distinctive feature of Aristotle’s virtue theory is the assumption that emotional reactions constitute essential ingredients in virtues. Emotional dispositions can, no less than action-dispositions, have an ‘intermediate and best condition [...] proper to virtue’ – when emotions are felt ‘at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way’ (1985, p. 44 [1106b17–35]). If a relevant emotion is ‘too intense or slack’ for its present object, we are badly off in relation to it, but if it is intermediate, we are ‘well off’ (1985, p. 41 [1105b26–28]). And persons can be fully virtuous only if they are regularly disposed to experience emotions in this medial way.

Specific episodic passions do not, however, constitute virtues any more than individual actions do. Rather, the virtues are settled character states: *hexeis*. We are praised or blamed for our virtues and vices, but we ‘do not blame the person who is simply angry’ (1985, p. 41 [1105b20–1106a7]). So the issue here is about emotions *qua* general emotional traits that we *have*, not about the *experience* of individual episodic passions; hence when I talk about the moral worth of awe in what follows, I am referring to awe as a possible virtuous *emotional trait*. In his *Rhetoric* (2007) Aristotle introduces a number of virtuous traits of that kind, along with their respective extremes: vices. Most notable there are the previously mentioned *nemesis*-family emotions, such as compassion (pain at another’s undeserved bad fortune)

and righteous indignation (pain at another's undeserved good fortune), which together form the overarching trait of poetic justice as a virtuous emotion (see Kristjánsson 2006, chap. 3; Curzer 2012, p. 245).

In proposing to give awe 'an Aristotelian treatment' here, however, we come up against a blank wall. Not only did Aristotle fail to value the sort of experiences encapsulated in awe, he even failed to identify awe as a putative emotion. When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes in the *Rhetoric* (2007), those fall broadly into three categories with respect to their targets: emotions directed at *oneself* (like pride), at *other people* (like compassion) or at *external events* (like fear). Notably missing from this list are emotions directed at *transpersonal* (non-self-or-selves-directed) ideals or idealisations, such as beauty, truth and goodness. There is no awe – either inspired by a heightened sense of beauty in art/nature, the immensity of the universe or the goodness of an ideal of self-sacrifice.

Knuutila makes this point bluntly when he says that 'Aristotle was not inclined to seek the meaning and end of life outside it, as Plato did, and correspondingly he did not think that detachment from appreciating contingent things and from associated emotions is what philosophy should teach people' (2004, p. 25).<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Aristotelian scholar Broadie complains that some sides of human nature are 'largely unexplored' by Aristotle, sides such that, in addition to being rational, we are also 'spiritual beings, responsive to beauty, imaginatively creative' (1991, p. 36), without awareness of which any account of human nature becomes deflated and incomplete. What many commentators consider one of the main attractions of Aristotelian flourishing, namely its distinctive worldliness and its

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<sup>5</sup> Obviously the complaint is not that Aristotle did not embrace self-transcendence understood in a 'horizontal' sense: as accommodating other people into one's sense of moral selfhood. Given his foregrounding of compassion (*eleos*) and friendship (*philia*), he is the self-transcendent moralist *par excellence*. However, Aristotle was a 'people person' (as explained well in Vogler 2016), and arguably did not accommodate self-transcendence in a 'vertical' sense, as awe-inspired attraction to transpersonal ideals (Kristjánsson 2016).

affirmation of ordinary life, may thus easily degenerate into a philistine fetishisation of the mundane, possibly accompanied by a sense of ‘emptiness, or non-resonance’ (Taylor 2007, p. 308). I see eerie signs of that in some neo-Aristotelian accounts of late.

What lesson can we draw from this about awe? The main lesson is – radically put – that Aristotle seems to have missed something fundamental about the human *ergon* (see further in Kristjánsson 2016). Latter-day theorists have identified those missing parts in human beings’ deep-seated orientation or urge – sometimes referred to as ‘a transcendent urge’ – towards extraordinary, idealised experiences of the true, good and beautiful (see e.g. Flanagan 2007, p. 187). This urge is revealed, *inter alia*, in the inter-human aesthetic impulse (Dissanayake 1992) and a strong drive towards some sort of spirituality (Hardy 1966). One could even argue that the desire for getting high on drugs – especially psychedelic drugs – has the same psychological (or biological) provenance. Sensuous affinity for the landscapes and life-forms of the world, as well as their representation in art, and awe before the immensity of the universe are examples of the sought-after experiences. Incorporating these considerations into a (naturalistic) account, Flanagan describes the good life in terms of a complex ‘psycho-poetic performance’ (2007, pp. 16, 187). In contrast, despite his profound interest in the moral value of poetry, Aristotle did not see art as satisfying a transcendent urge.

The good news, however, is that Aristotle’s uncompromising naturalism – the view that all moral theorising must be answerable to empirical evidence – allows us to update Aristotelianism in light of new findings.<sup>6</sup> If it is really true that the fullness of a life well lived cannot be achieved without experiences of awe, then the Aristotelian naturalistic theory requires that flourishing be partly constituted by the presence of the relevant

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. findings reported in Huta & Ryan 2010, on elevating experiences and *eudaimonic* well-being.

emotional trait – and that moral education be designed such as to cultivate this trait. To recall, emotions have a condition ‘proper to virtue’ – when they are felt ‘at the right times, about the right things [...] for the right end and in the right way’ (1985, p. 44 [1106b17–35]). Awe, as a virtuous emotion, would have to be felt towards the proper instantiations of the ideals of the good, true and beautiful (although it could accommodate pluralistic views about the relative worth of those values); awe at debauchery or sadism obviously does not count, nor does awe experienced in an acid trip (Vogler, 2016). More generally, for awe to count as virtuous, its necessary conditions delineated in the preceding section will all need to satisfy stringent constraints of representational fittingness and moral justifiability. Recall that if an emotion is ‘too intense or slack’, we are badly off in relation to it, but if it is intermediate, we are ‘well off’ (1985, p. 41 [1105b26–28]). It may seem strained, at first sight, to try to accommodate an emotional awe-trait within the Aristotelian architectonic of a quantitative and qualitative golden mean, but it is still worth a shot. For example, with respect to the quantitative mean, it is obviously not good to be in a state of constant rapture; that sort of *aestheticism on steroids* would count as the excess-extreme of awe. The deficiency-extreme would be constituted, however, by the *insipid philistinism* of those incapable of experiencing awe towards the right objects when the occasion calls for it. To be in a qualitative mean, awe would obviously also have to be felt for the right reasons, in the right manner, for the right length of time, etc., and it does not seem to be an insuperable task to work out such a mean for particular instances of awe.

Any emotional trait constitutive of true human flourishing has moral worth *qua* such a trait, according to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Fitting awe into the Aristotelian golden-mean architectonic thus furnishes us, at the same time, with a moral justification of the emotion.

Notice that this intrinsic justification is much stronger than suggested by typical instrumentalist ‘justifications’ in psychology, according to which awe is shown to be associated with, or conducive to, ethical variables (see e.g. Pfiff et al. 2015). Instrumentalist justifications of emotions tend to be ultimately dissatisfying for those who believe in the essential role of emotions in the good life, as they imply the essential substitutability of the given emotion by any other emotion (or any condition) which would produce more of the good results. If readers agree that there are grounds for incorporating awe in a conception of Aristotelian flourishing, instrumentalism of this kind is surely less than we have bargained for. Rather, awe must be seen as an irreplaceable ingredient in *eudaimonia*.

#### **4. A Presumed Link to Humility – and Is It Fatal to an Aristotelian Analysis of Awe?**

We are not completely out of the woods yet as far a proposed ‘Aristotelian’ justification of awe is concerned. An objection stands in a threatening position just offstage from the previous line of argument. This objection has to do with a central theme in much of the psychological literature on awe which connects awe to (a) a diminished sense of individual selfhood, and/or (b) humility (as opposed to pride/self-enhancement values), where (a) and (b) are often, but not always, spliced together. This theme is sometimes expressed as if humility is a *logical* implication of the cognitions constituting awe (Van Cappellen & Saraglou 2012); more often than not, however, it is expressed via an *empirical* thesis, according to which awe contributes, as a matter of fact, to a sense of ‘a small self’ which, in turn, explains awe’s positive effects on prosociality (Pfiff et al. 2015). In either case – and here is the point of the objection – this theme does not augur well for an Aristotelian analysis of awe’s moral worth; after all Aristotle was no admirer of ‘a small self’, and

humility is often categorised as an Aristotelian vice. I may already be seen to have made a concession towards a-small-self-assumption by including the ‘connection of the subject to a greater whole’ in the necessary conditions of awe, proposed in Section 2. Not all is what it seems here, however; and the issues broached in this paragraph require some careful scrutiny, starting with humility, to unravel tangles that may otherwise ensnare us.

When I was writing about humility and pride at the turn of the century (Kristjánsson 2002), the literature on humility was scant. Most conceptualisations took humility to refer to *underestimation* of moral worth – systematically low moral self-esteem, if you like – hardly justifiable except via religious arguments about the need to overplay one’s smallness in comparison with, and in order to honour, divine greatness. It was fairly easy to dismiss this conceptualisation, from an Aristotelian perspective, as designating the vice of *pusillanimity* (*mikropsychia*) – thinking oneself worthy of less than one is worthy of – the characteristic deficiency of proper pride (Aristotle 1985, p. 98 [1123b10–11]). Since then, however, the discourse has moved on considerably (see e.g. Chancellor & Lyubomirsky 2013, for an overview), and the emerging consensus is to understand humility as *non-overestimation* of moral self-worth (see e.g. McAleer 2012).<sup>7</sup>

It remains tricky, however, to square this ‘new’ non-overestimation conception of humility with Aristotle’s view of pride as non-underestimation of moral self-worth. On the one hand, non-overestimation and non-underestimation of worth may appear, from a logical point of view, to be extensionally equivalent (just like a half-empty and a half-full glass); after all both home in on accurate moral self-esteem. On the other hand, it is clear that

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<sup>7</sup> This may seem to create an unnecessary overlap between humility and *modesty*; why not stick to the latter term for the non-overestimation conception, to avoid ambiguity, as some people will continue to understand humility in the ‘old’ way? The reason seems to be that modesty is often taken to cover only behavioural aspects of self-estimation; one may really be arrogant deep down (with respect to one’s true beliefs and emotions) although one puts up a credible appearance of modesty.

advocates of humility and pride as virtues have radically different views of what one's real worth is and how it should be esteemed accurately, with the former directing attention to one's failings, fallibilities and radical dependency upon moral luck and other people; the latter, however, directing attention to successes, capacities and autonomously mastered independence. So although one conceptual hindrance has been removed, there is still a major obstacle in the way of an Aristotelian acceptance of humility as a virtue – and, by extension, of awe as virtuous if awe is logically and/or empirically tied to humility.

Here is a conciliatory suggestion. In the Aristotelian model, virtue is relative to individual constitution; for the golden mean of virtue is 'not the same for everyone' and 'in the object', but rather 'relative to us'. For instance, a diet conducive to flourishing for me is not the same for Milo, the athlete (1985, pp. 42– 43 [1106a26–b7]). Virtue education consists, *inter alia*, in helping us learn to 'steer clear of the more contrary extreme' (relative to the individual) by dragging ourselves off in the opposite direction 'as they do in straightening bent wood' (1985, pp. 51—52 [1109a30—b8]). Now, we are told in Aristotle's work that some people suffer from the vice/extreme of vanity or arrogance in the area of self-estimations of moral worth, thinking themselves worthy of more than they are really worthy of (1985, p. 98 [1123b8–9]); others (as already noted) from the vice/extreme of pusillanimity. While both should aim at dragging themselves in the opposite direction, the process will be different for the two groups. Arguably, the *corrective virtue* that the pusillanimous need is pride; the one that the vain need is humility. According to this conciliatory move, then (which is obviously not Aristotle's own although it is compatible with his model), both pride and humility make up the virtue of accurate moral self-esteem, although approaching it, as it were, from opposite directions according to the different needs of individuals.

I hope this proposed move removes some of the bad odour that Aristotelians and other humility naysayers consider to be attached to humility. Debates will doubtless continue about which of the two extremes poses the greater moral threat and, hence, whether the golden mean of accurate moral self-esteem is more significantly to be foregrounded as that of pride or humility. Aristotelians such as Howard Curzer (2012; and personal correspondence) may point out that for disadvantaged people (women, Blacks, the abused and poor), the more common vice is underestimating their moral self-worth, and since disadvantaged people constitute the overwhelming majority of people, a focus on humility can increase their misery as well as sustaining their subordination. Friends of humility will respond that, whatever the frequencies may be, excessive self-esteem – in addition to failing to incorporate correct beliefs about human vulnerabilities, frailties and finitude (McAleer 2012) – has been shown empirically to be more crippling, with respect to prosocial consequences, than deficient self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 2003). Yet, if Aristotelians acknowledge that humility can, under certain circumstances, constitute a virtue, this removes a conceptual barrier from accepting the putative virtuous status of awe, even if awe happens to have some associations with humility. Aristotelians can then simply posit that awe counts as a virtuous trait only if it is linked to humility *qua* virtue rather than humility *qua* vice.

It is not clear, however, that the small-self-claim in recent research on awe is always tantamount to a claim about a link between awe and humility (as lowered moral self-esteem). In some cases, the idea of a small self simply seems to refer to the capacity of awe to reduce what Iris Murdoch (1970) called our ‘fat ego’: namely, to the capacity of making us less egoistic morally and more connected to other people (see e.g. Van Cappellen & Saroglou 2012). However, highlighting this capacity is non-informative or, more

specifically, a truism. Awe is a transpersonal emotion. All emotions that are either transpersonal or other-person-focused (such as compassion) *ex hypothesi* direct attention away from the individual self that is the target of self-conscious emotions such as pride and shame. The ‘effect’ of awe towards self-transcendence is, therefore, not an empirical fact about experiences of awe but a logical implication of the nature of the awe concept.

As the claim of ‘a small self’ seems to careen between different possible understandings, it is instructive to explore how precisely it is measured in studies that profess to have established an empirical link between awe and a small self. In the recent study by Piff and colleagues (2015), participants were presented with four statements on a Likert scale: ‘I feel very small or insignificant’; ‘I feel the presence of something greater than myself’; ‘I feel part of some greater entity’; ‘I feel like I am in the presence of something grand’. The first thing to note about these statements is that they have little, if anything, to do with humility, as specified above, or with reduced moral egoism. To be more precise, these statements do not home in on self-esteem (as the perceived ratio of one’s accomplishments to one’s aspirations), but rather on something we could call our belief in the *ontological status of selfhood*, or the role of our selfhood in the grand scheme of things. All the metaphysical lumber that was supposed to be swept away in psychology when the focus turned from a realist self to an anti-realist self-concept seems thus to have returned in full force (for this distinction, see Piff et al. 2015, p. 896, where they differentiate negative self-feelings from beliefs in a small self).

Here, however, intuitions will vary radically. For me, the connection to a larger whole in awe does not imply a lessened ontological focus on myself. My intuition, after engaging emotionally with the infinite wonders of the universe, is this: ‘How wonderful that I exist

and I am not just this little dot here; I am part of a greater whole; I am truly important in the grand scheme of things; I am unbounded rather than buffered; just think how every small movement I make with my little finger creates waves that carry ripple effects to the outskirts of the universe.’ I would therefore strongly object to the equalising ‘and’ in the claim that ‘the experience of awe is associated with a sense of the smallness of the self *and* the presence of something greater than the self’ (Shiota, Keltner & Mossman 2007, p. 960, italics added). Nothing compels the acceptance of the equivalence of the two beliefs and much militates against it. Even in an explicitly religious paradigm of awe, a belief in a being immeasurably greater than the self is compatible with a belief in the great significance of human life (Wettstein 1997) or even with what we could call ‘ontological pride’ (to describe my own intuition above). Other writers, such as Wielenberg (2015), harbour radically different intuitions, according to which experiences of awe bring home to us our relative insignificance in the ultimate scheme of things in a naturalistic universe. Just consider our relative spatial tininess, Wielenberg argues, and the utter indifference of the vast majority of the universe to our personal travails. Positive psychologists Peterson and Seligman, whose insights about awe as a virtue or character strength, under the umbrella of ‘transcendence’, precede those of the present article, carve out a middle-ground position according to which transcendence ‘reminds us of how tiny we are but [...] simultaneously lifts us out of a sense of complete insignificance’ (2004, p. 39).

Where philosophical intuitions clash, psychologists march in with their instruments. So, have not the findings by Pfiff and colleagues (2015; cf. also Shiota, Keltner & Mossman 2007), of a link between awe and a small self, conclusively demonstrated that my intuitions are anomalous with respect to that of the greater public? It is inadvisable to draw that

conclusion, not only for substantive but also for methodological reasons. Recall the four statements that are meant to record our beliefs in a small self. All the statements, which we are supposed to register our agreement or disagreement with, contain versions of the claim that we are small fish in a big pond. In such cases, the proverbial *social desirability bias* is likely to kick in: ‘the researchers clearly want us to agree with this repeated claim.’ Why not offer options such as ‘I feel significant as part of a greater whole’ or ‘I feel bigger when I reflect upon my position in the great chain of things in the universe’? To put it simply, the worry is that the presentation of the options has slanted the responses in favour of a small self. A tremendously significant thesis about awe, as involving or enhancing a belief in small self, may thus in effect be pyramided upon a pin-point of empirical evidence.

Rejecting a link between awe and a belief in the diminished ontological status of selfhood *just* because Aristotle would fail to bestow benediction upon it is obviously a non-starter. I have, however, provided an independent argument above to show why this link may be methodologically suspect. I consider the belief in a small self to be an artificial and laboriously acquired ingredient in the characterisation of awe – a belief that would, in any case, seriously compromise the putative standing of awe as an Aristotelian virtuous emotion. Roberts does not go as far as I do, but he does judiciously observe that awe is not necessarily a ‘reflexive emotion’ in the sense of requiring a comparison of the greatness experienced with the subject’s self (2003, p. 270). Roberts unfortunately does not make a distinction between self-reflexive as ‘self-connective’ and as ‘self-comparative’. I argued earlier that awe necessarily *connects* the self to greatness, but I have suggested in this section that this does not necessarily involve *comparing* the self to something greater than itself. Sometimes this comparison may be made, and sometimes when it is made, it may elicit feelings of being

personally inadequate or trifling, but this elicitation is not a necessary condition of experiences of awe, nor – I would conjecture in default of satisfactory empirical evidence – a likely significant effect of awe.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

Aristotle is a veritable Achilles of emotion research, both conceptual and moral. Bringing awe into the fold of an Aristotelian analysis was always likely to be a Herculean task, as this emotion did not belong to his own developed and described repertoire of emotions – let alone ‘virtuous emotions’. However, it was also likely to pay dividends, if successful, because of the potential assets of an Aristotelian analysis, listed in Section 1.

I have explained how, through injections of updated Aristotelianism, it is possible to cash in on those dividends – most specifically by delineating the major components of awe in terms of necessary conditions, and to account for it as an umbrella emotion encompassing three more specific emotions of artistic ecstasy, intellectual elevation and moral elevation. I have argued that providing space for awe within a general naturalistic account of the good life *qua* flourishing – as satisfying deep-seated human urges for transpersonal attachments to ideals – enables us to explain not only its instrumental but also its intrinsic value, and I have explored how awe can be bent into conformity with Aristotle’s golden-mean architectonic. I have broken with a recent trend of understanding awe as associated with a diminished ontological sense of selfhood, and I have argued that even if a connection to humility does exist, it does not undermine awe’s putative Aristotelian credentials.

In response to Curzer’s scepticism, I am happy to concede that awe is typically problematic as an emotional reaction because (a) its medial form is precariously balanced

between philistinism and excessive aestheticism and (b) the excess form of it is much more debilitating and destabilising than the deficiency form – although less dull. There may also at times be some awkwardness about awe that makes it difficult to fit into a well-rounded, smoothly functioning life. These concessions do not mean, however, that the correct balance of awe experiences cannot, in principle, be struck. Moreover, it could perhaps be argued – although I will not pursue such an instrumentalist line of argument here – that even when awe experiences do not improve *perception* of the relevant ideals, they can nevertheless improve *motivation* (to do good things). This would, then, especially be true in the case of moral elevation.

The recently animated discourse on awe has unfortunately depended, for its continued vitality, upon the avoidance of a fully developed characterisation; I hope the present article can be seen to provide conceptual backbone to awe. That said, I have hardly more than gestured at the three specific emotions suggested to reside under awe's umbrella. I have not even indicated clearly whether aesthetic ecstasy, intellectual elevation and moral elevation make up three discrete emotions or simply represent the same emotion of awe with different causes. Of those three, only moral elevation has received sustained scrutiny of late (Haidt 2003). I believe that developing the considerations of this article would help nuance the discourse on elevation – although that must remain a topic for another day.

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