

BEING ON THE RECEIVING END: AWE AS DISCLOSURE

NICHOLAS BUCK

ABSTRACT: Recent studies of awe in psychology and philosophy help to clarify and refine our understanding of the experience and its impact on human life. However, these disciplines tend to offer functional or broadly transcendental accounts of awe that trace its significance rather directly back to the self. This sits in some tension with awe centrally involving the experience of being drawn out of oneself by and toward what lies beyond it. In this paper I endeavor to remain longer with the experience itself and speculate about awe as a source of insight. Drawing on a range of philosophical, religious, and literary voices, I set out to consider what it might be that experiences of awe characteristically disclose about the world that includes yet transcends the self. By virtue of the profound state of receptivity they prompt, I propose that in experiences of awe persons become available to and increasingly aware of the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of some particular awe object(s) and, more broadly, of existence itself. After unpacking these ideas and their connections, I consider some ethical and existential implications of awe and advocate that its disclosures root and inform whatever views of the world we may construct. I conclude by suggesting that perhaps the most profound disclosure of awe involves the awareness of one's own self as given.

Studi recenti sul senso del sublime in ambito psicologico e filosofico contribuiscono a chiarire e affinare la nostra comprensione dell'esperienza e del suo impatto sulla vita umana. Tuttavia, tali discipline tendono a fornire interpretazioni funzionali o genericamente trascendentali del sublime, riconducendone il significato in modo piuttosto diretto al sé. Ciò appare in certa tensione con il fatto che l'esperienza del sublime implica in modo essenziale l'essere tratti fuori di sé da ciò che si colloca oltre. In questo saggio, mi propongo di soffermarmi più a lungo sull'esperienza in quanto tale e di riflettere in via speculativa sul sublime come fonte di comprensione. Attingendo a una pluralità di voci filosofiche, religiose e letterarie, intendo interrogarmi su ciò che le esperienze del sublime tendono a rivelare del mondo, un mondo che include il sé ma lo trascende. In virtù dello stato profondo

di ricettività che esse suscitano, propongo che, nel vivere il sublime, le persone divengano disponibili a percepire e progressivamente consapevoli del carattere donato, dell'abbondanza e del valore intrinseco di uno o più oggetti del sublime e, in senso più ampio, dell'esistenza stessa. Dopo aver articolato questi concetti e le loro interconnessioni, considero alcune implicazioni etiche ed esistenziali del sublime, sostenendo che le sue rivelazioni dovrebbero costituire fondamento e orientamento di qualunque visione del mondo si possa costruire. Concludo suggerendo che forse la rivelazione più profonda connessa al sublime consista nella consapevolezza del proprio sé in quanto donato.

KEYWORDS: Awe, Metaphysics, Givenness, Abundance, Value

PAROLE CHIAVE: Stupore, Metafisica, Donazione, Abbondanza, Valore

Awe is, irreducibly, an experience, something persons undergo, and a rather idiosyncratic one at that. Saying anything meaningful about awe therefore requires remaining open to its varying manifestations without becoming mired in indeterminacy. Relatedly, any such attempts must also be wary of tendencies toward subjectivism or sentimentalism.

To avoid these pitfalls, I will embrace what psychological research has shown are the basic contours of awe, which will help to keep my speculations grounded. However, if psychology can effectively capture the experience of awe, why pursue these speculations at all? Although helpful in numerous ways, I find functionalist considerations of awe like those provided in the psychological literature inadequate. Such accounts strike me as decidedly incomplete on their own, if not contradictory, for considering awe in such a way that primarily and so directly traces its significance back to the self, given that awe is the experience of being drawn out of oneself by and toward what lies beyond it.

As I will explain, I find some prominent philosophical accounts of awe similarly constrained, insightful though they are. I note two strong tendencies in philosophy to focus either on awe's effects or on what its experience reveals about the necessary conditions for knowledge, experience, and even selfhood. In contrast to these broadly functional and transcendental approaches, I will pursue a rather different agenda that attempts to remain longer *with* the experience itself.

I begin by noting that awe is bound up with perception. Along with evoking a range of affective responses, awe involves or is associated with

an increased awareness of some seemingly novel dimension, feature, or context pertaining to the objects of perception. Although what it brings to awareness may not be initially conceptual or linguistic, awe usually involves or precipitates at least some rudimentary reflective processing of its experience, which the psychological literature shows. I aim to pursue the idea that awe contributes something to a person's awareness and/or knowledge and to inquire after awe as a source of insight. More specifically, I set out to consider what it might be that experiences of awe disclose about *the world*.

I surmise that awe does not regularly disclose much by way of detail belonging to some object(s) of perception. Instead, I propose that awe's disclosures are best understood, at least in part, as metaphysical, by which I mean they indicate something pertaining to what it is *to be*, that is, *to exist*⁽¹⁾. In what follows, I will proceed in the spirit of Henry Bugbee's rather bold and provocative suggestion for a construal of awe "not merely as a provocation for reflection, but also as containing the germ of fundamental truth" (Bugbee 1999, p. 40)⁽²⁾. I will leave open and unresolved the relation between what is disclosed in an experience of awe and things "as they really are," although I should say in passing that I find such a dualistic and simplistic correspondence construal unsatisfactory.

I maintain that awe's metaphysical disclosures occur in a distinct manner. As has been convincingly argued by others, we humans are the sorts of creatures whose lives tend to be lived in a state or mode of concern — oriented to practical tasks, motivated by specific interests, and grounded in fidelity to certain commitments and/or communities — that filters our perceptions and disposes us toward objects and others in consequent ways⁽³⁾. For such creatures as we seem to be, awe characteristically arrives as a disruption, however temporarily and partially. I take this to be the reason why we often resort to language like that of being

(1) Mary-Jane Rubenstein opposes metaphysics and awe, a result of our different understandings of metaphysics, aside from which we share several key ideas (Rubenstein 2008).

(2) In this instance, Bugbee uses the term "wonder," but he appears to mean basically the same thing I mean by awe.

(3) Most immediate to mind is Martin Heidegger's account of the human person's (*Dasein*'s) "Being towards the world" in the mode of "concern," which manifests "concernful dealings" with things (Heidegger 1962, pp. 78-107).

“struck” or “stunned” when describing it. Experiences of awe are thus interruptions whereby a person’s default posture of *being concerned* is briefly loosened, slackened, or forgotten⁽⁴⁾. Because of this, although its experiences can surely manifest a number of effects, awe can be understood in the first instance as perhaps the non–pragmatic and non–utilitarian experience *par excellence*.

In a state or mode of concern, persons are actively (better, *proactively*) disposed, but experiences of awe render them otherwise, cast in a state of receptivity⁽⁵⁾. As a result, moments of awe provide opportunities for encounters far less constrained, conditioned, or overdetermined by one’s operative agendas⁽⁶⁾. My core proposal is that in experiences of awe, in virtue of the state of receptivity they prompt, persons become available to and increasingly aware of the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of awe objects (those directly tied to the experience) and, more broadly, of *existence itself*⁽⁷⁾. I will build toward these points by first surveying the relevant psychological literature and engaging with select philosophical perspectives.

Before doing so, however, a word about the terrain ahead. Owing to the nature of our subject matter, I will (must!) proceed in the manner of description, suggestion, and speculation rather than formal argumentation. The success of my proposals will rest not only on the

(4) Take, for instance, Annie Dillard’s account of an experience of awe she had while gazing at fish as they reflected glints of sunlight in a remote creek: “So I blurred my eyes and gazed toward the brim of my hat and saw a new world. I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world’s turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was a lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh–flake, feather, bone” (Dillard 1998, p. 34).

(5) Without space to unpack this point, I flag an important difference between receptivity and passivity.

(6) I am not claiming that the more persons perceive some object or other as independent of or unrelated to themselves the more “accurate” the perception might be. Such a view trades on an atomistic and dualist account of selves and others that I reject. Rather, I am arguing that the construal of objects and others foremost in terms of how they serve, benefit, or impact oneself is, at minimum, always a disfiguring reduction.

(7) There are notable connections between my account of awe and Sophie Grace Chappell’s account of epiphanies (of which she claims awe is one kind), especially regarding the elements of givenness and value, but we come to these points by way of rather different routes (Chappell 2022, pp. 8–9, 11).

strength of the relations between ideas but also on their resonance with experiences of awe, including those of my readers. Along the way, I will gesture in the footnotes to various writers whose first-personal descriptions of awe inform or support the points being made.

1. Awe in recent psychology

The field of psychology has recently taken up the topic of awe in earnest and shed light on its characteristic features. In an early influential study, Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt show that experiences of awe tend to consist of two core components: perceptual “vastness” and a felt “need for accommodation” (Keltner and Haidt 2003, pp. 303–304). In other words, they demonstrate that awe occurs as something like a response to an excess of perceptual content that resists full cognitive account.

It is now commonly held that a key feature in experiences of awe is a diminished or “small” sense of self. As one group of researchers explains this, awe characteristically has the effect of “broadening the individual’s perspective to include entities vaster and more powerful than oneself and diminishing the salience of the individual,” which, they show, has a tendency to generate “prosocial” effects (Piff *et al.* 2015, pp. 895–896). As such a conclusion indicates, awe has considerable potential moral impact, which has become a prominent area of research. One team of researchers, for example, shows that awe often has the effect of cultivating humility by “shift[ing] self-perception in the opposite direction [than something like pride], causing an individual to fully appreciate the value of others and see themselves more accurately” (Stellar *et al.* 2018, p. 266). On a similar note, others have shown that experiences of awe quite often include a “relational component” that can generate a sense of interconnectedness with others (Liu *et al.* 2023, pp. 2, 8–9).

In his recent survey of this literature, Keltner writes that in experiences of awe the sense of “small self” is bound up with a “boundary-dissolving sense of being part of something much larger” (Keltner 2023, p. 31). He concludes that “the substance and structure of awe’s epiphany,” what he calls “its big idea,” is that “awe locates us in forces

larger than ourselves” and thereby “integrates us into the systems of life — communities, collectives, the natural environment, and forms of culture” (Keltner 2023, pp. 243, 249). Keltner argues that awe is therefore evolutionarily beneficial for helping to raise awareness about the way persons are interrelated with and dependent upon natural, physical, cultural, and social systems, which proves to be helpful for navigating, sustaining, and relating well to them (Keltner 2023, p. 248).

This rather brief overview of the psychological literature on awe, incomplete though it is, evinces three things. First, there seems to be broad agreement that awe involves experiences of perceptual vastness, the need for accommodation, and a “small” self. Second, there is considerable evidence that experiences of awe lead to increasing awareness of the self’s connectedness to others and/or its locatedness within a broad context. Third, psychological research maintains methodological commitment to a functionalist account of awe, meaning that its significance is foremost a matter of its impact on or the role it serves for those experiencing it.

2. Awe in recent philosophy

The topic of awe has long been of interest to philosophers, along with related notions like the sublime⁽⁸⁾. I discern that the most generative subfields or traditions of philosophy to bring into dialogue on our topic are cognitive science and phenomenology. Philosophy of cognitive science is apt for taking the brain and behavioral sciences among its primary interlocutors and connecting empirical insights with philosophical reflection. Phenomenology, a tradition of philosophy committed to capturing the richness of perception, is relevant for plumbing so decidedly an experiential topic. Given the limitations of space, I will engage one figure from each of these subfields, respectively.

Helen De Cruz’s book, *Wonderstruck: How Wonder and Awe Shape the Way We Think*, astutely brings the psychological research on awe

(8) Andrzej Karpinski provides a comparison of Immanuel Kant’s account of the sublime and Jean–Luc Marion’s account of the saturated phenomenon, the latter of which I consider below (Karpinski 2022). On this comparison, see also Desmond 2020, pp. 209–211.

into conversation with some prominent figures and themes within and beyond Western philosophy. De Cruz contends that awe and its companion, wonder, are “epistemic” and “self-transcendent” emotions that “motivate us to explore our environment and learn more about it” by “help[ing] us move away from a focus on ourselves and our own concerns” (De Cruz 2024, pp. 5–6). Her overall argument is that “awe and wonder are emotions that we harness by means of cultural practices, that we nurture deliberately, and that are part of a positive feedback loop. Because we feel awe and wonder, we come up with ideas and inventions in the sciences, arts, and other domains of human cultures. Those ideas in turn become objects of awe and wonder, and push us to ever further heights” (De Cruz 2024, p. 12). De Cruz convincingly explains how these emotions contribute to the expansion of human knowledge by following this recursive pattern.

Informed by evolutionary biology, De Cruz maintains that “the function of emotions is to help organisms thrive, flourish, take care of their offspring, and avoid situations that cause them injury or death” (De Cruz 2024, p. 48). Although she supplements this biological picture with a socio-cultural dimension, she nevertheless settles on a functionalist account of emotions. So following, De Cruz ultimately construes awe and wonder as “cognitive technologies” that “allow us to control ourselves and our environment, by changing how our mind engages with the world” as well as “our frame of reference” (De Cruz 2024, pp. 15, 115).

De Cruz insightfully demonstrates this by tracing how awe and wonder show up in the writings of Rachel Carson. De Cruz draws out the idea in Carson’s work that awe and wonder at the natural world involve a “recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence,” and that “[t]hose who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts” (Carson 1965, p. 98, quoted in De Cruz 2024, p. 163). According to Carson, awe and wonder motivate responses of conservation and preservation and stand at odds with contrary impulses, which she identifies with a “lust for destruction” (Carson 1999, p. 163, quoted in De Cruz 2024, p. 163). De Cruz reads Carson as making the case that awe and wonder enable persons to become “properly attentive to the intrinsic value of

natural beauty,” which is transformative for leading to the cultivation of corresponding moral virtue (De Cruz 2024, p. 164)⁽⁹⁾.

Building off these ideas, De Cruz argues that awe and wonder — albeit in some tension with her functionalist framing — are “non-utilitarian emotions” that “help us to see things not as means to economic or other ends, but as valuable in themselves” (De Cruz 2024, pp. 169–170)⁽¹⁰⁾. In the spirit of Carson, De Cruz writes, without saying much more about where this sense of value comes from, that “[n]ature is worth wondering at [and, ostensibly, worth being in awe about], and by engaging earnestly with its diversity of life forms, we can become more aware of their intrinsic worth” (De Cruz 2024, p. 171). I find the connection De Cruz identifies between awe and intrinsic value an important one, but I am interested in an explanation for it. The account of awe that I pursue below, which includes its relation to value, will also contrast with De Cruz’s mostly functionalist account.

Jean-Luc Marion is a notable figure in contemporary phenomenology and is especially relevant for his account of a distinct form of experience that has considerable overlap with awe. Much of his work, including what is relevant to our topic, is developed in dialogue with and as a response to Immanuel Kant’s influential philosophical framework.

On Marion’s explanation, Kant argues that the subject (the “I” of first-person experience) is transcendental for providing and/or deploying the necessary conditions for knowledge. As Marion presents it, according to this transcendental scheme such conditions not only structure what is known in a given instance but also they determine what *can* be known. This extends even to experience more broadly, the contents of which, like knowledge, depend for their appearance before the subject’s awareness upon the satisfaction of certain formal conditions set by reason (Marion 2008b, pp. 19–20). Ultimately, Marion sees this leading to an aporia: “the possibility of appearing never belongs to what appears” (Marion 2008b, p. 21). In other words, we are left in

(9) De Cruz is here drawing on the reading of Carson offered by Kathleen Dean Moore (Moore 2005).

(10) Similarly, Bugbee writes, “Things exist in their own right; it is a lesson that escapes us except as they hold us in awe” (Bugbee 1999, p. 164). There is some explanatory distance between something existing in its own right and it having value, but De Cruz’s interest in this point seems to be largely descriptive.

the unsettling position where the very *possibility* of some objects appearing before a subject's conscious awareness is determined ahead of time by certain formal conditions independent of the objects themselves. At this conclusion, the status of objects *as such* is radically undermined.

According to Marion, the tradition of phenomenology is able to overcome such constraints by turning exclusively to the contents of experience (referred to as phenomena) themselves. Revealing the full implications and guiding aspiration of this turn is what Marion calls the *saturated phenomenon*, which refers to a form of experience that defies any aforementioned transcendental conditions by "exceed[ing] all categories and the principles of understanding" (Marion 2008b, p. 34). In such an experience, he explains, the self is confronted with its own conceptual limitations in its inability to account for what overwhelms its knowledge and awareness (Marion 2008b, p. 44)⁽¹¹⁾. Along with this being a presumably relatable experience, albeit paradoxical on a scheme of transcendental subjectivity as Marion identifies, we can see considerable resonance with what has been described as the experience of perceptual vastness and the accompanying felt need for accommodation⁽¹²⁾.

In his book, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Marion pursues the saturated phenomenon as a paradigm for revealing how to understand the contents of experience. The details of his argument are quite technical, but its core ideas can be summarized for our purposes. For Marion, the saturated phenomenon leads us to conceive of the contents of experience most fundamentally as *given*, a term that appeals to allowing an object of perception "its right and its power to show *itself* on its own terms" (Marion, 2002, p. 19, emphasis original). This is the radical ideal Marion locates at the core of the phenomenological tradition that the saturated phenomenon demands: the possibility of transcendently impossible experiences; that is, the possibility for objects of experience to appear entirely on their own terms, without imposed, preemptive constraint by the experiencing subject.

(11) In his essay "Walking," Henry David Thoreau describes the experience of "a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before" (Thoreau 2012, p. 583).

(12) Marion (in translation) uses terms like "amazement" and "bedazzlement" to describe the experience of the saturated phenomenon. (Marion 2008b, pp. 35, 36).

Marking a decisive break with a core feature of Kant's transcendental philosophy, this entails an inversion of the subject's priority over its object(s)⁽¹³⁾. As a result of this inversion, Marion argues that the self is shown to be most accurately not "subject" but rather "the gifted," that is, the recipient of what is given, not only for being that which receives its object(s) of perception but, moreover, for coming to see it is precisely in such receiving that selfhood takes shape⁽¹⁴⁾. "Far from being able to constitute this," he writes about the saturated phenomenon, "the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it. [...] The *I* loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted" (Marion 2008b, p. 44, emphasis original). In phenomenological terms, Marion argues that the saturated phenomenon reveals an inversion of intentionality's priority over intuition, a move that not only inverts the priority of subject over object but that ultimately results in understanding the self — *à la* Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Louis Chrétien — as that which responds, as that which is constituted by response, to what it receives (a "call") from what is other (Marion 2002, pp. 282–290).

Two ideas from Marion's work are especially relevant to our discussion. First is the notion of givenness, which refers to an encounter with objects of perception exceeding the self's full knowledge and awareness on non-self-derived terms. Second is the line of reasoning whereby the self is understood to be *that which receives* its objects of perception, and even itself. I will return to these below and identify points of similarity and difference with my own perspective. However, I first want to draw out an important point of contrast between Marion's view and mine.

Our differences boil down to the matter of fidelity to the formal tradition of phenomenology and its location downstream from the

(13) Marion: "Kant's determination of the transcendental I was and still is, even in its aporias, the counter-model of the gifted" (Marion 2002, p. 278).

(14) Something like the awareness of oneself as recipient is evident in Helen Macdonald's description of awe as involving those "times in which the world stutters, turns and fills with unexpected meaning. When rapturousness claims a moment and transfigures it[...] the pattern of hailstones by my feet upon dark earth; a certain cast of light across a hillside through a break in the clouds; the face of a long-eared owl peering out at me from a hawthorn bush – things whose fugitive instances give me an overwhelming sense of how unlikely it is that in the days of my brief life I should be in the right place at the right time and possess sufficient quality of attention to see them all" (Macdonald 2020, pp. 286–287).

broadly Kantian framework noted above. Marion is a thoroughgoing phenomenologist, having pushed and developed the tradition from within. That is a critical point because of the methodological commitments (i.e., via the “phenomenological reduction”) that determine his framing of the contents of experience in terms of phenomenality, and thus always and only as or how things appear (present or give themselves) to an experiencing subject or self. Even though he moves to invert the noted priority of the Kantian “I” and traces the wide-ranging effects of doing so, proceeding from so resolutely *within* the frame of transcendental subjectivity leaves him (by my lights) overly constrained regarding what can and should be said about the self, “the world” and its objects, and relations among them. Otherwise put, I have doubts about whether Marion’s approach is able to finally escape the orbit of the transcendental subject⁽¹⁵⁾. The major worry here concerns the residue of the dualism between mind and world that the Kantian perspective posits and Marion unsettles⁽¹⁶⁾. Rather than pursuing a way in and through the Kantian transcendental framework, hewing so closely to the domain of (and conditions for) subjectivity, my own view locates the self more firmly *in* the world and, although less salient for present purposes, constitutively related to others.

3. Reconsidering awe in a metaphysical register

I now turn to consider awe as a potential source of insight about what lies beyond the self. Drawing on select thinkers who approach these matters metaphysically, I will elaborate on my suggestion that experiences of awe disclose the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of awe objects and, moreover, of *existence itself*. In so doing, my task is to draw out and give voice to at least part of what is often unarticulated

(15) William Desmond raises a version of this concern about Marion’s position, tracing the difference between them to his following a Hegelian rather than Kantian trajectory (Desmond 2020, pp. 199–203).

(16) This dualism takes on several forms: phenomenal/noumenal, rational/empirical, subjective/objective, gifted/given. It is almost as if Marion is concerned not so much with there being a strong dualism but rather with its priority; genuine alterity, he might be taken to suggest, requires its inversion rather than its dissolution.

but intuitively present in experiences of awe, which, I intend to show, is supported by an array of interrelated reasons. I wager that speculative considerations of the sort presented here are not only potentially insightful, albeit neither fully conclusive nor exclusive, but also that they are required to adequately honor the experience of awe itself.

First, to the matter of givenness, about which Abraham Joshua Heschel's descriptions of and reflections on awe are instructive. Heschel describes awe as an encounter with "grandeur" that arrives with a "compulsion to pay attention to that which lies beyond our grasp" (Heschel 1951, pp. 3, 4)⁽¹⁷⁾. He writes that such "radical amazement" involves "the state of maladjustment to words and notions" and further to being "amazed at seeing anything at all; amazed not only at particular values and things but *at the unexpectedness of being as such*, at the fact that there is being at all" (Heschel 1951, pp. 11, 12, emphasis original). Resonant with numerous comments above, awe, for Heschel, involves coming into contact with awe objects on profoundly non-self-referential terms, writing that in such instances "[w]hat we perceive is objective in the sense of being independent of and corresponding to our perception," which "we do not create" but "encounter" (Heschel 1951, p. 20).

Notable in Heschel's description is the connection between awe and attention. He identifies a point numerous writers have noted, that the experience of awe is *attention grabbing*, that it takes hold of one's awareness seemingly without or even against one's intention⁽¹⁸⁾. Awe dawns as a surprise, as a sudden overtaking of one's awareness. This relates to the characteristic receptivity prompted by awe, experiences of which are best described as *happening to* persons.

I especially want to consider the aspect of awe that, on Heschel's account, has us "amazed at seeing [...] particular values and things" relating to a sense of surprise or "unexpectedness" about their very existence. He suggests that awe has us look not simply (or even much at all) with more acuity at awe objects but, moreover, that the experience

(17) Heschel clarifies that he means more by this than the mere constraints of language: "What smites us with unquenchable amazement is not that which we grasp and are able to convey but that which lies within our reach but beyond our grasp" (Heschel 1951, pp. 4–5).

(18) For example, Macdonald writes of awe involving experiences "in which my attention has unaccountably snagged" (Macdonald 2020, p. 287).

brings to our awareness as remarkable their very being⁽¹⁹⁾. To elaborate this in a parallel idiom, we might say that experiences of awe involve confrontation with what reason and the subject cannot get behind: the very *being* of awe objects⁽²⁰⁾. As an addition or additional dimension to the felt “need for accommodation” that characteristically accompanies its experience, I submit that a key feature — perhaps, we might say, the very texture — of awe is an encounter with some object(s) *as given*. There is overlap between my use of givenness and Marion’s, but I want to nuance its meaning. Along with referencing their *being* (rather than their “appearance,” on which the anti-metaphysician Marion insists) as not traceable to and fully knowable by the self, I also incorporate Heschel’s point that such an awareness of the inexplicable *being there* of awe objects gives rise to increasing alertness to the surprise of *being itself*. That is, Heschel suggests awe has us become alert to the very existence of awe objects, which gives rise to a sudden and perhaps jarring alertness to there being *anything at all*.

This connection between awareness of the being of awe objects and *being itself* is an important and recurring theme in depictions of awe, which we see explicitly when Heschel writes that the amazement at “particular values and things” evoked by awe often leads to a sense of surprise “that there is being at all” (Heschel 1951, p. 12)⁽²¹⁾. Experiences

(19) In what appears to be both an ontological and biological sense, Dillard remarks, after so diligently observing the whims of muskrats, that, “The great hurrah about wild animals is that they exist at all” (Dillard 1998, p. 195).

(20) Similarly, Marion argues, “any phenomenon is without *why*, since any phenomenon is as it gives itself” (Marion 2008a, p. 5, emphasis original). He and I are running parallel on this point, although we mean something different by the term “being.” What I am referring to here is more robust than but has overlap with what De Cruz calls “a sense of firstness” that often accompanies awe (De Cruz 2024, p. 19).

(21) To give one example, in Thoreau’s account of his ascent of Mount Katahdin he writes about an experience of awe he had as he came upon a sudden clearing. On his description, the experience involved not just particular awe objects (such as particular plants and trees) but also reflective confrontation with what he calls “matter” itself, which brought him to a state of astonishment about very fact of existence and his own participation in it: “We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste [...] I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, — *that* my body might, — but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact*! *Contact*! *Who* are we? *where* are we?” (Thoreau 2012, p. 61, emphasis original).

of awe have a tendency to raise the lights, as it were, on *being itself*, in which individual awe objects participate. In other words, a notable feature of the experience of awe is that the typically indirect and tacit cognizance of being itself — including awareness of the otherwise seemingly banal fact that there is anything at all — is brought increasingly into direct awareness.

Heschel's comments suggest that in an experience of awe being itself comes into awareness in a particular way as captured by what Gabriel Marcel calls *mystery*. Marcel refers to *being* as a mystery because no critical distance from it can be achieved, because it cannot be rendered an object before a knowing subject, since the self both necessarily presupposes and is irrevocably bound up with it (Marcel 1956, pp. 18–22). Here we have an ontological correlate to a central theme in the psychological literature, what Keltner calls awe's "big idea," pertaining to the self being located within a larger context of life. From one angle, this may seem like another banal claim — that a self is revealed to be a part of "the world" — but it is something transcendental frameworks tend to obscure. Being-as-mystery amounts to a non-dualistic understanding that is metaphysical in ways De Cruz and Marion seem to avoid or resist.

Second, to the matter of abundance, which is an elaboration on givenness. This is a point that appears in the work of nearly every voice engaged here and refers to the "objective" pole of what is experienced as perceptual vastness and the felt need for accommodation⁽²²⁾. As a result, my comments will be brief.

The core idea here is to resist reducing the experience of vastness to purely subjective veracity. There is less a case to be made for this than there is an appeal to sit longer with what experiences of awe tend to offer: encounters with awe objects and being itself as manifestly profuse. One pathway that I find particularly compelling for resonating most thoroughly with its experience is that awe reveals not merely that

(22) Dillard gestures to abundance and givenness in her account of a moment of rapture when hiking as she was overwhelmed by the plenitude she encountered: "A great tall cloud moved elegantly across an invisible walkway in the upper air, sliding on its flat foot like an enormous proud snail. I smelled silt on the wind, turkey, laundry, leaves[...] my God what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it" (Dillard 1998, pp. 266–267). I am reminded, too, of her remark about the stunning "profligacy" of the natural world (Dillard 1998, p. 66).

there is more to objects and being itself than anyone can know but rather that every being, in the becoming of its co-implicated particularity, and being itself, in its apparently inexhaustible particularizing, are infinitely abundant⁽²³⁾.

Third, to the matter of value. Rephrasing an earlier point, encountering awe objects as given tends to involve, as if by relief, a felt confrontation with the ontological counterfactual possibility of their not having been. This is surely what is involved in Heschel's being "amazed" at their very existence, not an awareness of the possibility that awe objects could have turned out differently but rather a brush with the thought of their not having existed at all.

In this way, awe has a tendency to draw awareness to the very being of awe objects and, as noted, to being itself. William Desmond shows how this connects to the matter of value⁽²⁴⁾. He suggests that what gives rise to that fundamental question about the givenness of being, the question of why there is something rather than nothing, is not only an articulated perplexity about origins but also a certain sort of acknowledgement corresponding to the very *thatness* of being itself (Desmond 1995, pp. 227–232). Desmond remarks that the sheer presence of things conveys what he calls "aesthetic value," akin to a work of art, that speaks to "the worth of the thereness, as given in its sensuous manifestness" (Desmond 1995, p. 513). We saw De Cruz describe something like this sense of intrinsic value above, but Desmond charts a metaphysical explanation for it.

Desmond proposes the *thatness and thereness* of things exudes a sense of value arising from implicit contrast to the possibility of their absence. In other words, he suggests that the aforementioned counterfactual (the passing consideration of some awe object(s) not existing at all) conveys an approbative intimation: as given, the existence of something, of anything, is an assertion, an insistence or manifestation,

(23) This is one of the most significant commitments of William Desmond's metaphysics (Desmond 1995).

(24) We see this movement from the particular to the global and, furthermore, connecting to the matter of value in an awe experience described by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. For her, this arose amid studious attending to non-human animals in their rich variety, which moved her to a state of "cherishing this magnificent and wondrous planet" (Nezhukumatathil 2020, p. 160).

of being over its absence, of something over nothing⁽²⁵⁾. Desmond identifies this as an *elemental affirmation* of existence, and thus of what exists, in virtue of its very manifestness. Heschel makes a similar claim, referring to a sense of “transcendent *preciousness*” with which he finds the world “resplendent” (Heschel 1951, p. 29, emphasis original). Such elemental affirmation, itself a sense of value, is only heightened given the abundance of things that arrives independent of the self. In short, the experience of awe discloses the being of awe objects and being itself as gratuitous in both meanings of the term — unmerited or unwarranted (given) and excessive (abundant) — and, as such, intrinsically valuable in an elemental sense (Desmond 1995, pp. 512–514)⁽²⁶⁾.

4. Conclusion

In light of the above reflections, I now turn to some concerns pertaining to the diminishing sense of self that characteristically accompanies experiences of awe. One concern is how this might have the effect of minimizing the status or value of *the particular*. Keltner praises the way that awe can encourage persons “to sacrifice, share, put aside self-interest in favor of the interests of others,” and he makes an approving reference to utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer along the way (Keltner 2023, p. 40). Yet, I do not see him adequately acknowledging or addressing the potential this might have for encouraging crass consequentialism by submitting the worth of individuals to simple quantitative reasoning, or for inviting reductive collectivism by so minimizing the significance

(25) Dillard identifies something like this rising to awareness in her experiences when referring to “the something that exists over against nothing” (Dillard 1998, p. 132).

(26) Something like a sense of elemental valuation is evident in Anne Carolyn Klein’s account of an experience of awe she had near Patras, which she reports evoking a sense of appreciation or “love” for all that is: “I walked slowly along the quay with my friend, not talking, letting my senses melt into blue vistas as far as the eye could see, the golden sun lying low, sky and water shining everywhere, feeling an intimate part of this expansive display and filled with a simple love for all of it” (Klein 2023, p. 7). He does not explain it in the same way that I (via Desmond) have, but Bugbee also draws a connection between givenness and value (Bugbee 1999, p. 155).

of the individual in the pursuit of some larger purpose⁽²⁷⁾. This also pertains to the potential weaponization of awe⁽²⁸⁾.

A second concern pertains to how experiences of awe might be existentially unsettling for diminishing the significance of the self in the face of broad forces that outstretch its power, and to which the self is exposed and vulnerable⁽²⁹⁾. More pointedly, awe might be taken to reveal the self under threat of annihilation by indifferent if not malevolent forces. Variations of this view are evident in a number of existentialist writers who conceive of the self as emerging from constitutive conflict with what threatens its dissolution (Rubenstein 2008, pp. 25–97).

I take these concerns to track plausible interpretations or implications of awe, although the experience affords resources for resisting their conclusions. Regarding the first, and without dismissing a need for tradeoffs in moral reasoning, acknowledgement of the intrinsic value belonging to objects and others in their abundant particularity stoutly resists crass consequentialist reasoning and the slide into reductive and homogenizing collectivism. As to the second, the road to existential angst is paved by forgetfulness about the givenness of being, the being of oneself and every other; accordingly, the self does not emerge from dramatic struggle against violent totality (which is not to deny its threat) or in defiance of the abyss but rather as the recipient of valuable, gratuitous donation. And this, I submit, without evading the fragility and finitude belonging to it⁽³⁰⁾. If I am right that givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value are authentically conveyed in experiences of awe, then what I am suggesting is not an imposition of artificial features onto its experience but rather a call to become increasingly attuned to and mindful of all that is present in it.

(27) Keltner does point to evidence that awe can encourage or increase critical thinking and self-reflection, but I discern that a person could endorse crass consequentialism (if not also reductive collectivism) in a thoroughly reasonable way (i.e., Keltner 2023, p. 135). What adequately interrupts an end-means justification is not critical reason but abundance and value.

(28) Consider, for instance, the U.S. military campaign of “Shock and Awe” (Rubenstein 2008, pp. 187–188).

(29) I note in passing obvious resonance with Rudolf Otto’s account of the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1950).

(30) See Desmond 2020, pp. 205–207. Awe is not only or always a genial, calm, or non-threatening experience. For example, Dillard remarks on the “violence” and “horrors” that were often part of her experiences of awe relating to the natural world (i.e., Dillard 1998, pp. 10, 64–66). As Dillard’s writing also suggests, this does not necessarily contradict any of my claims above.

The radical implication of my claim about awe as a source of metaphysical insight is that its disclosures should root and inform whatever view of the world we construct. For an exemplary model of this, I point to Desmond's work, which builds on Plato's suggestion that philosophy begins in astonishment and is built around a conception of being entirely in line with what I have proposed are awe's disclosures (Desmond 1995)⁽³¹⁾.

At the start, I claimed that experiences of awe cast the self in a state of receptivity, but we have left to fully consider this from the "objective" side, which extends even to the givenness of the self. I am referring to the metaphysical dimension of something we saw Marion claim, that in an experience of awe the self comes to grasp also its *own* being as given. Perhaps awe's most essential disclosure is that *to be* a self (or anything else) is to be a recipient in a truly global sense; it is *to be* on the receiving end, attunement to which ought to inform the morally significant work of cultivating patience before and openness to the valuable, abundant givenness of oneself, others, and *all that is*⁽³²⁾.

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(31) Relatedly, Bugbee identifies something like awe as that toward which philosophy should be oriented (Bugbee 1999, p. 154).

(32) Desmond makes a case along these lines for what he calls "metaphysical patience" and "*passio essendi*" (Desmond 1995, pp. 454–455; Desmond 2020, pp. 202–203).

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