Impact of Awe on Prosocial Behavior and Authenticity for Personal Growth and Communal Well-being

Ruizhe Xiong
Letter of Art and Science, Psychology Department and Molecular Cell Biology Department
University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720.
success2015usa@gmail.com

Abstract. Awe, characterized by feelings of vastness and accommodation, can lead to both positive and negative valence emotions. The experience of awe triggers self-transcendence, driving individuals to seek greater meaning in their lives and fostering a sense of interconnectedness with others. Self-transcendence promotes authenticity by aligning actions with one's genuine self, reducing the fear of disapproval or inauthentic behavior within social groups. As a result, individuals who experience awe are more inclined to exhibit authentic prosocial behavior, benefiting both themselves and society. This paper explores the profound impact of awe on prosocial behavior and authenticity. It delves into the intricate relationship between awe, self-transcendence, authenticity, and prosociality, highlighting the significance of seeking awe-inspiring experiences for personal growth and communal well-being.

Keywords: awe, self-transcendence, authenticity, prosociality.

1. Introduction

Social psychologists widely focus their studies on individuals and their interaction within social contexts, as humans are social animals as they constantly immerse themselves in social contexts which require dependence on each other. In order to adjust to the rapidly changing environments, people utilize emotions to efficiently communicate and establish relationships with each other, which is more commonly known as the social functional theory of emotion (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). However, certain emotions have different origins and influences. For example, some emotions, such as love, contribute to a positive mood, which enhances people’s well-being, while some emotions, such as fear, alert people of potential danger by eliciting adverse reactions. Awe, being a positive-valanced emotion, often increases individuals’ prosocial behaviors by increasing their connection with society and encouraging them to pursue their meaning in life (Fu et al 2022, Susan & Myriam 2021). Jiang, & Sedikides (2022) were pioneers in researching the relationship between awe and authentic self-pursuit and found that awe leads to authentic prosocial behaviors through self-transcendence. Continuing this line of study, this paper conducts a literature review of awe and authenticity and argues that awe-elicited self-transcendence can increase a person’s authenticity, leading to authentic prosocial behavior. It begins by defining awe, self-transcendence, and authentic self-pursuit. Then, it discusses how awe elicits self-transcendence and demonstrates the relationship between self-transcendence and authenticity. The relationship between awe and authentic prosociality suggests that people who feel awe will be more consistent with their benevolent behaviors.

2. Motivation

In a world marked by rapid technological advancements, social complexities, and increasing divisions, the exploration of human emotions and their effects on individual and communal well-being has never been more relevant. Among the myriad emotions that humans experience, awe stands out as a particularly intriguing and transformative phenomenon. It is the profound sense of wonder that we experience when confronted with something greater than ourselves, be it the
grandeur of nature, the beauty of art, or the vastness of the cosmos. Awe has the power to leave us humbled, inspired, and deeply connected to the world around us.

This paper seeks to delve into the profound impact of awe on two crucial aspects of human existence: prosocial behavior and authenticity. The motivation behind this research endeavor is multifold:

1. Understanding Human Nature: At its core, the study of human behavior and psychology aims to shed light on what it means to be human. Awe is a fundamental human emotion that has shaped our cultures, our art, and our spirituality for millennia. Exploring how awe influences our actions and our sense of self is an essential step in understanding the essence of human nature.

2. Promoting Personal Growth: In today's fast-paced and often superficial world, individuals are constantly seeking ways to grow and develop on a personal level. Awe has the potential to serve as a catalyst for such growth by encouraging self-transcendence. Understanding how awe can propel individuals towards greater meaning in life and personal authenticity can offer valuable insights into the pursuit of personal growth and fulfillment.

3. Enhancing Communal Well-Being: In a society where divisions and conflicts can threaten the fabric of community and cooperation, the study of awe's impact on prosocial behavior is especially pertinent. By uncovering how awe experiences promote empathy, kindness, and cooperation, we can contribute to fostering a more compassionate and interconnected society.

4. Applications in Psychology and Therapy: The findings of this research can have practical implications in the fields of psychology and therapy. Awe-inducing experiences could be harnessed to help individuals overcome personal barriers, find meaning in their lives, and build more authentic connections with others.

5. Environmental and Social Advocacy: Awe's role in promoting environmental stewardship and social advocacy is an important area of exploration. Understanding how awe can inspire individuals to take action for the betterment of the planet and society can have far-reaching consequences for addressing global challenges.

In essence, this paper seeks to uncover the profound ways in which awe impacts our lives, from our personal growth to our contributions to the well-being of the communities we inhabit. By examining the relationship between awe, self-transcendence, authenticity, and prosocial behavior, we hope to shed light on the potential for awe-inspiring experiences to bring about positive changes in individuals and society as a whole. Ultimately, this research aims to inspire a deeper appreciation for the role of awe in our lives and encourage the pursuit of awe-inspiring moments as a means of personal growth and communal well-being.

3. Awe and Self-Transcendence

Awe is an emotion that has been studied in a variety of different fields of study, such as sociology, theology, and philosophy. In the realm of social psychology, Keltner and Haidt (2003) define awe as requiring two components: vastness and accommodation. First, the feeling of vastness occurs when people encounter something that is larger than themselves and beyond their comprehension. Vastness commonly refers to the physical size of an awe-inducing object, but Keltner notes that it can also relate to social size, for example, fame or authority. Piff et al. (2015) referred to this concept as the “small self”, in that when encountering something of such vastness, people have a tendency to feel small or insignificant by comparison, and as such their goals feel diminished. However, despite a “diminished sense of self” (Piff et al., 2015), this encounter with an object of vastness creates awe, which in turn can promote prosocial behavior. Consequently, this leads to a sense of accommodation, meaning that people must adjust their minds to make sense of the awe-inducing subject and accommodate themselves to the new experience. While awe is mostly viewed as a positive emotion, research has revealed that it also has a negative valence.
Threat awe is considered to have different elicitors. For example, early psychologists linked awe to the emotion of fear (Hall, 1897; McDougall, 1908, as cited in Bonner & Friedman, 2011). Keltner and Haidt noted that over time, the emotional association of awe has shifted its focus as a positive valence emotion, perhaps due to evolution in language and vocabulary (Bonner & Friedman, 2011). Nakayama et al. (2020) investigated how individuals are affected positive and negative effects of awe, and the relationship between positive and negative effects of awe. They noted that certain awe-inducing phenomena, for example a thunderstorm, can elicit both positive awe, through the appraisal of beauty, and also negative awe, through the feeling of threat. Particularly, several Asian languages associate the word for awe with “fear”, including in Chinese and Japanese (Gordon et al., 2017; Halstead & Halstead, 2004, as cited in Nakayama et al., 2020).

Threat-induced awe has a different function to positive awe. Takano and Nomura (2022) furthered this research of the connection between threat and self-transcendence. They noted how prior research “has suggested that threat-awe elicited by experiencing natural disasters strengthens social ties among community members of the survival group” (Takano and Nomura, 2022). Particularly, their studies focused on Japanese individuals’ perceptions of threat-induced awe. Research concluded that Japanese often differentiate between positive and negative awe by utilizing different vocabulary for threat-awe experiences compared to positive valanced awe experiences. Despite feeling a sense of powerlessness, or the aforementioned “diminished sense of self” (Piff et al., 2015), threat-awe also promotes self-transcendence. Takano and Nomura (2022) noted that their research participants who experienced threat-awe felt both a greater sense of powerlessness but also a greater interdependent worldview than participants who experienced positive awe. Therefore, negative awe also promoted self-transcendence which led to increased prosocial tendencies. However, it should be noted that this study involved only Japanese participants. Conversely, studies conducted by Nakayama et al. (2020) utilized both North American and Japanese participants. North American participants were more predisposed to feel positive awe than Japanese participants, and no correlation between the two states of awe were found among North American participants. However, they noted a correlation between positive and negative aspects of awe for Japanese participants (Nakayama et al., 2020). Therefore, how individuals interpret both positive and negative awe can be determined by culture.

Ultimately, experiences of awe lead to self-transcendence: a search for meaning in life. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs places self-actualization at the top of the pyramid of people’s motivational needs (Maslow, 1964). Maslow’s self-actualization, also referred to as peak experience, has also been used as a term for self-transcendence. Bethelmy and Corraliza used Maslow’s concept of self-actualization when they defined self-transcendence as “a larger-than-life experience of self-realization characterized by a mix of spiritual emotions like enlightenment, awe, reverence, humility, happiness, wonder, and connection to the universe, among others” (2019). Reed et. al. (1991, as cited in Levenson et al., 2005) proposed that self-transcendence could occur at any age, which often involves boundary expansion and a heightened perception of the present moment. Levenson et. al. (2005) furthered this definition of self-transcendence to a spiritual realm and proposed different methods for self-development that could lead to self-transcendence. The development starts with self-knowledge as recognizing attributes that constitute a person’s self-identity. Acknowledging the transient nature of these factors allows people to detach from the worldly definition of the self and blur the boundaries between one’s own self and others, thus achieving self-transcendence (Loy, 1996). As people grow older, self-transcendence is also related to methods of coping with stress, as demonstrated in the biblical story of Job. In the story, Job achieved self-transcendence after years of suffering. He eventually gained transformation and wisdom, equivalent to self-transcendence, after achieving self-knowledge, empathy, and recognition of his limit (Levenson, 2005).

Garcia-Romeau (2010) discussed the connections between self-transcendence and transpersonal development. Notably, this research defined self-transcendence as “a major contributing factor determining human personality” (Garcia-Romeau, 2010).
Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) attempted to define more elusive aspects of self-transcendent experience (STE). They defined self-transcendence as feeling connected to something larger than oneself or feeling like part of a larger whole. They discussed the phenomenological aspects of self-transcendence, which they described as having three main themes: “somatic manifestations, perceptual alterations, and cognitive-affect shifts” (Garcia-Romeu et al., 2015). Notably, somatic effects of self-transcendence imply that awe not only psychologically affects an individual, but also affects individuals physically. Participants in this study reported a wide range of somatic manifestations after experiencing awe, including shaking or loss of control, temperature changes, for example feelings of warmth, or even negative effects such as nausea and vomiting.

Wong (2016) discussed the benefits of pursuing meaning in life to achieve self-transcendence. He described three distinct levels of meaning, utilizing Viktor Frankl’s concept of logotherapy:

1. Seeking ultimate meaning.
2. Seeking situational meaning.
3. Seeking one’s calling.

Wong refers to seeking ultimate meaning as something which involves self-reflection, or through making spiritual or philosophical inquiry (2016). Situational meaning refers to an individual’s ability to detach themselves from their self-interests and things which distort our perception of the present moment. Seeking one’s calling involves searching for a higher purpose and fulfilling it. Notably, when describing seeking one’s calling, Wong states:

“a particular event may trigger one’s desire to pursue a certain mission consistent with one’s values and passion. For example, a person may have the desire to serve the poor and disadvantaged. When he learns about the opportunity to serve in a leper colony, he may accept this mission as his calling” (2016).

It could be suggested that awe-inspiring events could function as such a trigger to motivate self-transcendence and awaken prosocial tendencies. The given example of a leper colony serves as negative awe but promotes prosociality and the feeling of wanting to help others and contribute towards group efforts.

Paolini et al. (2016) also discussed the benefits of self-transcendence and how it promotes intergroup contact. However, the researchers instead used the term “self-expansion”, based on Aron and Aron’s (1986) self-expansion model. Paolini et al. noted that “positive orientation towards ‘otherness’ stems from a fundamental human motivation to expand the self in order to increase one’s general self-efficacy” (2016). Humans are driven towards experiences that allow us to expand beyond our boundaries and broaden our perspectives. Steenbergen et al. (2016) also studied how self-expansion motivates prosociality and improves self-growth. Notably, they discussed how “one’s current level of self-expansion motivation will vary depending on recent experiences and messages in the local environment” (Steenbergen et al., 2016). Motivation for self-expansion can often change and become either stronger or weaker depending on internal and external circumstances in an individual’s life. Therefore, external experiences such as those which generate awe might serve to strengthen an individual’s desire to seek self-transcendence.

4. Intergroup Connection and Authenticity

Social Authenticity refers to the state of being aligned with one’s genuine self. In order to remain authentic, or true to ourselves, our actions and goals must align with our genuine self (Jiang & Sedikidis, 2022). However, in group scenarios, individuals may behave in an inauthentic manner due to fear of disapproval or of being rejected by others. Menzies and Davidson (2002) noted that modern day migration, for example economic migration, has resulted in a form of “cultural dislocation” for many individuals. People feel a need to belong as part of a group, and therefore change their behavior and cultural attitudes to successfully assimilate into other cultures. This state has also been referred to as the ‘false self’ (Winnicott, 1960, as cited in Menzies & Davidson, 2002).

In fact, some individuals might not even be aware that their behavior is inauthentic until they
experience something which allows them to identify their true self. Prolonged inauthentic behavior can often lead to individuals experiencing feelings of hopelessness or alienation. Individuals are often unaware of or choose to ignore their true self, and instead focus on the needs of their inauthentic self, in order to satisfy career, family, or other social goals (Menzies & Davidson, 2002). For example, in some cases, individuals who participate in prosocial or benevolent acts might be exhibiting inauthentic behavior. They may choose to act benevolently because they believe it is the morally correct thing to do in the eyes of society, and do not want to be judged negatively by others. Alternatively, they may only participate in benevolent acts as a means to benefit themselves, for example individuals who donate to charity so they can deduct the amount when they file their taxes annually. They participate in prosocial or benevolent acts due to extrinsic motivation, rather than the benevolent act being in line with their authentic self.

As awe leads to self-transcendence, which improves our feeling of connectedness to others, it could be proposed that experiencing awe can lead to increased authenticity, as we would not experience such a strong fear of disapproval or rejection that could lead to inauthentic behavior. Mateeva and Dimitrov (2013) studied how intergroup relations can affect group dynamics and how this in-turn affects authentic behavior. They used Maslow’s concept of self-actualization and discussed authenticity as being when individuals “discover their true inner nature and actualize their inherent potentialities” (Maslow, 1968, as cited in Mateeva & Dimitrov, 2013). Individuals experience self-transcendence exhibit greater authenticity. In turn, this may result in benevolent behavior becoming a greater part of their authentic self, rather than being an inauthentic or extrinsically motivated. Authenticity is closely linked to self-transcendence. Authentic individuals are those who align their actions with their genuine selves, acting in ways that reflect their true values and beliefs. Awe plays a pivotal role in promoting authenticity by reducing the fear of disapproval or inauthentic behavior within social groups. When individuals experience awe, they are often moved by a profound sense of wonder and reverence. In these moments, they feel a deep connection to the world around them and a sense of authenticity in their responses. Awe encourages individuals to be true to themselves, unencumbered by the need to conform to social expectations or seek external validation. Moreover, awe can serve as a reminder of the impermanence and fragility of life. This awareness can lead individuals to prioritize authenticity in their actions, as they recognize the preciousness of time and the importance of living in accordance with their core values and beliefs. One of the most remarkable consequences of experiencing awe is its positive impact on prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior encompasses acts of kindness, empathy, and cooperation that benefit both individuals and society as a whole. Awe inspires individuals to extend themselves beyond their immediate concerns and connect with others on a deeper level. The sense of interconnectedness that often accompanies awe experiences fosters a greater sense of empathy and compassion. When people perceive themselves as part of a larger whole, they are more inclined to consider the well-being of others. This heightened sense of altruism and cooperation can lead to a range of prosocial behaviors, from helping strangers in need to engaging in acts of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, the authenticity that awe promotes in individuals extends to their prosocial actions. When individuals act from a place of authenticity, their altruism is genuine and heartfelt, rather than driven by external pressures or rewards. This authentic prosocial behavior has a lasting and meaningful impact on both the individuals who engage in it and the communities they are a part of.

5. Further Insights

As we delve deeper into the exploration of awe's profound influence on prosocial behavior and authenticity, it becomes increasingly evident that this emotional experience carries significant implications for personal development and communal well-being. In this section, we will continue to dissect and discuss the multifaceted aspects of awe, its role in shaping our actions and identities, and the potential it holds for creating a more interconnected and compassionate world.
1. The Role of Self-Transcendence in Awe: Awe serves as a bridge between the individual and the collective, encouraging self-transcendence. This shift from ego-centered concerns to a broader perspective can lead to the discovery of purpose and meaning beyond one's immediate desires. The concept of self-transcendence raises questions about how awe might influence personal identity.

2. Authenticity as a Catalyst for Prosocial Behavior: The link between authenticity and prosocial behavior is a critical one. Authentic individuals tend to engage in prosocial acts genuinely and without ulterior motives. Consideration should also be given to the potential barriers that might inhibit individuals from acting authentically in prosocial situations.

3. Awe and Community Building: Awe experiences can serve as powerful tools for community building. Shared moments of awe can strengthen social bonds and create a sense of shared identity among individuals or groups. This phenomenon can be particularly relevant in promoting communal well-being and harmony. Exploring the ways in which awe can be intentionally cultivated within communities and used to enhance cooperation, empathy, and social cohesion is an avenue for further research.

4. Practical Applications and Interventions: There is the potential to inform practical applications in various domains. In the field of education, for instance, educators might use awe-inducing experiences to enhance empathy and cooperation among students. In therapeutic settings, awe could be integrated into treatments to foster personal growth and authenticity. Environmental and social advocacy groups can leverage the power of awe to inspire individuals to take action for the betterment of the planet and society. Understanding the mechanisms through which awe motivates such action can lead to more effective advocacy campaigns.

5. Awe and the Digital Age: In a world increasingly dominated by technology and digital experiences, it is crucial to examine how virtual or mediated experiences of awe compare to in-person experiences.

6. Ethical Considerations: As we explore the potential benefits of awe, it is essential to consider the ethical dimensions of using awe for specific ends.

The impact of awe on prosocial behavior and authenticity is a rich and evolving area of study with broad implications for individual well-being and the health of communities and societies. As we continue to unravel the intricacies of awe's influence, we must remain mindful of the ethical, practical, and theoretical dimensions of this phenomenon. Ultimately, awe has the potential to guide us towards a more authentic, interconnected, and compassionate world, and understanding its workings is a journey worth pursuing for the betterment of humanity.

6. Conclusion

Awe is a powerful emotion. It is often characterized by vastness, which relates to feelings generated when experiencing something of immense size or scope, and accommodation, which is a mental adjustment to process the awe-inducing event and adapt to it. While awe is often only thought of as a positively valenced emotion, awe also has negative valence. For example, feelings of fear brought about by those who have experienced natural disasters. Both positive and negative awe can lead to self-transcendence, which Maslow (1964) placed at the top of the Hierarchy of Needs that individuals strive to attain. Self-transcendence involves finding greater meaning in our own lives, and becoming closer to our authentic, or true self. Prior research has concluded that experiencing events that generate awe is linked to self-transcendence. One particular aspect
associated with self-transcendence is a feeling of being part of something greater than oneself (Garcia-Romeau et al., 2015). Self-transcendence promotes a feeling of group interconnectivity between individuals (Paolini et al., 2016). Feelings part of a larger whole, or feeling closer to other members of the same group, creates prosocial tendencies to help those within the same group (Fu et al. 2022; Susan & Myriam 2021; Wong, 2016). This relationship between self-transcendence and prosociality makes individuals feel closer to others within their group, and so they act with greater authenticity and behave more in line with their true self. Therefore, individuals who experience awe are more likely to exhibit authentic prosocial behavior, rather than behaving inauthentically (Mateeva & Dimitrov, 2013). Ultimately, it can be suggested that individuals should seek out experiences that generate positive awe-inducing, as they can lead towards self-transcendence, a stronger sense of connection with others, and more authentic prosocial behaviors.

References


