Consciousness is Sublime

Takuya Niikawa

Kobe University

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Abstract

Does consciousness have non-instrumental aesthetic value? This paper answers this question affirmatively by arguing that consciousness is sublime. The argument consists of three premises. (1) An awe experience of an object provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the object is sublime. (2) I have an awe experience about consciousness through introspecting three features of consciousness, namely the mystery of consciousness, the connection between consciousness and well-being, and the phenomenological complexity of consciousness. (3) There is no good defeater of the justificatory force of my feeling of awe for the sublime of consciousness. To defend the third premise, I argue against two potential defeaters: The first is that most people do not regard consciousness as sublime. The second is that there do not seem to be physical properties that can ground the sublimity of consciousness. I conclude by emphasizing an important ethical implication of the thesis that consciousness is sublime, namely that it explains why even conscious subjects who cannot have valenced experiences deserve moral consideration.

Keywords: Consciousness, Aesthetics, Sublime, Aesthetic Value, The Value of Consciousness

1 Introduction

What value does consciousness have? What can entities gain in virtue of having consciousness? The axiological questions about consciousness have recently been tackled by many philosophers (Kriegel 2019). Some claim that consciousness has *functional value*, arguing that living beings gain certain cognitive capacities in virtue of having consciousness (Graziano 2019; Kanai et al. 2019). Some claim that (perceptual) consciousness has *epistemic value*, arguing that we can have non-inferential knowledge by having perceptual experiences (Johnston 2006; Smithies 2019). Some argue that entities have *moral status* in virtue of having consciousness (Kriegel 2017; Shepherd 2018; Niikawa 2018).

What about the *aesthetic value* of consciousness? The aesthetic significance of consciousness has been widely discussed. For instance, it has been discussed how artworks can be aesthetically appreciated through perceptual experiences (Nanay 2016; Stokes 2018); it has been argued that some kinds of emotional experiences represent their target objects as having aesthetic properties (Fingerhut and Prinz 2018; Goffin 2019). Most importantly, it has been much discussed how aesthetic experiences are related to the aesthetic value of things like artworks and natural objects (Stecker 2006; Van der Berg 2020). However, the existing discussions are exclusively directed at the aesthetic value of *aesthetic experiences*, which they have in connection with their intentional objects, such as artworks and nature. There is no discussion of *what aesthetic value consciousness as such can have, in itself* and regardless of any specific intentional objects. In other words, *the intrinsic aesthetic value of consciousness per se* has not been discussed in the existing literature.

Does consciousness have intrinsic aesthetic value? This paper aims to answer this question affirmatively by arguing that consciousness has the value of *sublimity*. The argument consists of three premises. (1) An awe experience of an object provides *prima*

facie justification to believe that the object is sublime. (2) I have an awe experience about consciousness through introspecting some features of consciousness. (3) There is no good defeater of the justificatory force of my feeling of awe for the sublime of consciousness. The conjunction of the three premises justifies my judgment that consciousness is sublime. In what follows, I will argue for each premise in turn. In the final section, I also discuss the ethical implications of the claim that consciousness is sublime.

2 Consciousness and Awe

In this section, I defend premise 2 that I have an awe experience about consciousness through introspecting some features of consciousness. First, I clarify what "awe" means. Second, I discuss three awe-inspiring features of consciousness. Third, I demonstrate that I stand in awe of consciousness when introspecting those features of consciousness with an aesthetic attitude.

2.1 Awe

I sometimes remember unforgettable aesthetic experiences I had when I looked out over the Icelandic wilderness and saw both volcanoes and glaciers in one view, and when I looked at Notre Dame Cathedral engulfed in flames with the chants of Parisians in the background.[1] In having those experiences, I was so overwhelmed and shuddered that I felt myself small and insignificant, but was also wrapped in strong aesthetic pleasure and could not look away, murmuring "what the hell is this?". This kind of aesthetic experiences is sometimes called awe or sublime experience.

Although awe experiences were sometimes naively identified with sublime

[1] A massive fire broke out at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris on 15-16th April 2019, causing extensive damage, including the collapse of one of the steeples. Parisians gathered around the burning cathedral and prayed, singing Ave Maria.

experiences in philosophical aesthetics (Brady 2013: 2; McShane 2013), the identification has recently been challenged (Clewis 2021). This subsection characterizes awe and sublime experiences through describing what they share and how they should be distinguished.

While the concept of the sublime has been much discussed in philosophical aesthetics, pioneered by Burke and Kant, the concept of awe has not been the subject of philosophical scrutiny until recently (Kristjánsson 2017). In contrast, there have been many pieces of psychological research on awe in the last 20 years, starting from the excellent work of Keltner and Haidt (2003), whereas the sublime has rarely been the subject of psychological research. To bridge this gap, some have recently attempted to link philosophical analyses of the sublime with psychological studies on awe (Arcangeli et al. 2020; Arcangeli and Dokic 2021; Clewis 2021).

Through such attempts, it turned out that awe and sublime experiences are commonly characterized (at least partly) in terms of the following four key features (Fredericks 2018; Arcangeli and Dokic 2021; Clewis 2021; Shapshay 2021): (i) *Ambivalence*: awe and sublime experiences involve both pleasure and displeasure. (ii) *Positive Valence Predominance*: awe and sublime experiences are overall positively valenced. (iii) *Overwhelmingness*: awe and sublime experiences represent the object of experience as overwhelming (while the subject may experience themselves as relatively small/insignificant). (iv) *Desire for Understanding*: awe and sublime experiences involve a desire to understand their objects (even if it requires expanding/reconfiguring the subject's epistemic framework).

As Clewis (2021) argues, however, we should not simply equate awe and sublime experiences, because while sublime experiences are necessarily aesthetic, there exist *non-aesthetic kinds of awe experiences*, such as religious awe experiences (see also Quinn 1997). It is only *aesthetic* awe experiences that should be identified with sublime experiences. For an awe experience to be aesthetic, it must involve general properties

characteristic of aesthetic experiences, such as absorbed attention away from everyday concerns and a desire to continue the experiences (Clewis 2021: 309). In contrast, religious awe experiences would have general properties characteristic of religious experiences, such as being mediated by religious beliefs. Given this, aesthetic awe experiences (or sublime experiences) should be characterized as having Ambivalence, Positive Valence Predominance, Overwhelmingness, Desire for Understanding, and general properties characteristic of aesthetic experiences. In what follows, the term "awe" is used to refer to aesthetic awe and "generic awe" to awe in general.

I close this subsection by stating what I assume about the nature of awe experiences. Awe experiences are typically directed at natural phenomena such as mountains or storms. However, it has been argued that awe experiences can be directed at artificial objects such as monumental structures (Shapshay 2021) and abstract entities such as mathematical laws and concepts like "justice" and "human right" (Fredericks 2018). Since abstract objects are not necessarily perceptible, awe experiences may sometimes be non-perceptual. As Goffin (2019) plausibly argues, however, the attribution of aesthetic properties is grounded in emotional experiences rather than perceptual experiences. Relevantly, Gorodeisky argues that aesthetic appreciation consists of affective experiences such as pleasure, stating that "the view that affective experiences do reveal certain aspects of the world to us by teaching us, say, what is attractive or repulsive or beautiful or sublime seems to be a common pre-theoretical assumption" (2021: 211). Following Fredericks (2018), Goffin (2019), and Gorodeisky (2021), this paper assumes that awe experiences are emotional (or equivalently affective) and can be directed at abstract objects.

2.2 Three awe-inspiring features of consciousness

I am now sitting in front of my desktop and tasting a glass of excellent Scotch

whisky, Bowmore 12 years old. I am attentively savoring the perfect balance of white peach and floral notes blending with the smell of peat and thinking about how to describe this flavor, while I am also seeing the words on the monitor and feeling the pressure from my chair (less attentively). This is an everyday example of conscious experiences. In what follows, I discuss three features of conscious experiences that seem to inspire the feeling of awe: (1) the mystery of consciousness, (2) its relation to well-being, and (3) its complexity.[2]

2.2.1 Mystery of Consciousness.

To have consciousness is to exist with a subjective perspective from which to experience the world (Nagel 1974). It is a great mystery why and how consciousness, an essentially subjective phenomenon, arises in the physical world. Let me quote two famous passages, one from Thomas Henry Huxley (known in his day as “Darwin's Bulldog”) and the other from Vladimir Nabokov:

> How it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as a result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the djinn when Aladdin rubbed his lamp in the story. (Huxley 1866: 210)

> [in response to the interviewer's question, "What surprises you in life?"] Its complete unreality; the marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being; the mind's hopeless inability to cope with its own essence and sense. (Nabokov 1976)

[2] For more detailed discussions of the awe-inspiring features of consciousness, see (Niikawa and Kriegel forthcoming).

Many consciousness researchers have tackled this mystery, producing many theories of consciousness. Nevertheless, there is no robust consensus on which theory of consciousness is promising. One camp holds that consciousness is a biological phenomenon (Ginsburg and Jablonka 2019), while another holds that consciousness is an informational phenomenon that can be realized in a computer simulation (Chalmers 2022). Some claim that consciousness is ubiquitous in that even microphysical entities can have it (Goff 2017), while others claim that consciousness is a high-level cognitive phenomenon that only cognitively sophisticated entities can have (Rosenthal 1986). It has even been argued that human beings cannot understand the nature of consciousness in the same way a dog cannot understand calculus (McGinn 1989). This strongly suggests that we do not yet have any clear understanding of why and how consciousness arises in the physical world.

There is no doubt that scientific consciousness studies have developed rapidly. Much has been found about which brain areas are associated with different conscious experiences (Koch et al. 2016). However, it is still unclear why specific brain activities give rise to consciousness and why certain neural activities are associated with red experiences rather than green experiences. Consciousness is still deeply mysterious.

More importantly, even if the metaphysical nature of consciousness is uncovered, consciousness will continue to be mysterious. Suppose, for instance, that it turns out that consciousness is identical to certain neural activities. In this case, it does not make sense to ask why and how consciousness is identical to the neural activities, because numerical identity is generally not further analyzable. For example, the question of why and how The Undertaker is identical to Mark Calaway can only be answered in a trivial manner, namely by saying "because they are the same person". However, suppose that I am told that my flavour experience of Bowmore 12 years is numerically identical to the activities of my brain behind my eyes. Then I cannot help but ask how they can be numerically identical or what it means that "this" flavour experience is numerically identical to the

activities of "that" brain. In this sense, the mystery will never disappear from consciousness.[3]

In this respect, consciousness differs from *life*. One might wonder if life is also mysterious in that it is still unclear how life arose in the physical world, namely how organisms arose from inorganic matter. However, if the nature of life is uncovered, no mystery remains. For instance, if it turns out that life is identical to some holistic feature of physical entities, then arguably we do not feel like asking how they can be identical. The gap between consciousness and matter is much larger than that between life and matter (Chalmers 2010).

2.2.2 Consciousness and Well-Being

It is widely accepted that to have consciousness is to exist as *something to which well-being can be attributed* (Shepherd 2018; van der Deijl 2021; Kriegel forthcoming). Consciousness makes it possible to have valenced experiences such as pleasure and pain, thereby making it possible to fare well or poorly. Indeed, we intuitively think of non-conscious entities such as stones and chairs as something to which well-being cannot be attributed. A few philosophers, such as Bradford (2022), do deny that consciousness is necessary for well-being, but even they accept that conscious experiences contribute most significantly to well-being. Simply put, the possession of consciousness makes its possessor's life meaningful and worthy of living (Siewert 1998; 2013), or at least much more meaningful and worthy than otherwise. This is also a distinctive feature of consciousness.

[3] According to Papineau (2002), this is in part because we have “the intuition of distinctness” about consciousness and the brain. Even if this is true, it does not affect my argument here. Unless the intuition of distinctness disappears, consciousness continues to be mysterious. And arguably, we cannot easily discard the intuition of distinctness.

2.2.3 The Phenomenological Complexity of Consciousness.

Consciousness involves different kinds of contents, including perceptual, cognitive and conative ones (Kriegel 2015). Consciousness is structured in that the contents of consciousness are organized and constrained in various manners. I will show three examples. First, consciousness has *a figure-ground structure*: while some contents of consciousness are attended in the foreground, other contents recede into the background (Watzl 2011). Although what content is in the foreground and what content in the background constantly changes, the figure-ground structure itself does not collapse during the content alternation. Second, consciousness is *unified* in that the contents of consciousness are always integrated into a whole (Bayne 2010). Third, consciousness is *stable* in quantity and duration in that how much content a single conscious experience can have and how long it can continue does not radically change in normal conditions. For instance, the limit of how much I can consciously perceive at one time does not change so radically. Summarizing this by using James' words, consciousness is not "a blooming, buzzing confusion" (James 1983: 462) but a well-organized complex.

2.3 Awe directed towards consciousness.

I sometimes have a strong emotional feeling when I introspect on my own consciousness, drawing attention to the three characteristics I have described—the mystery of consciousness, the connection between consciousness and well-being, and the phenomenological complexity of consciousness. This emotional experience seems to satisfy all the conditions to be generic awe experience: (i) Ambivalence, (ii) Positive Valence Predominance, (iii) Overwhelmingness and (vi) Desire for Understanding. In having the emotional experience directed at my own consciousness, consciousness

appears as something *extremely enigmatic* concerning its relation to the physical world and at the same time *incomparably significant* for me, in that it gives meaning to my existence and life; I also marvel at the well-organized complexity of consciousness (Overwhelmingness). While I strongly desire to understand and uncover the nature of consciousness (Desire for Understanding), I also feel the limits of my own intellect (Overwhelmingness). This emotional experience has at its core a strong aesthetic pleasure, but is also accompanied by the discomfort of facing the abyss of existence and the essential limit of my intellect (Ambivalence and Positive Valence Dominance). Then the phrase "what the hell is this?" spills out of my mouth, just as I did when I looked at the Icelandic wilderness or Notre Dame Cathedral in flames.

This emotional experience also seems to have the general properties that characterize aesthetic experiences. When introspecting on consciousness for the purpose of knowing how it is, it usually involves a suspension of natural attitudes toward environmental objects, which would imply distancing from everyday practical interests. This means that the awe experience gained through such introspection involves absorbed attention distancing from everyday concerns. Furthermore, according to the minimal conception of aesthetic experience presented by Stecker, aesthetic experiences are characterized as "the experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake or for the sake of this very experience" (2006: 4). My awe experience in question clearly counts as being aesthetic in this minimal sense, because I attended to the three "meaningful" features of consciousness in introspection and the absorbed attention was carried out not for any instrumental reasons. Therefore, it is plausible to regard the emotional experience as aesthetic awe.

Note that consciousness, unlike the Icelandic wilderness and Notre Dame Cathedral, does not seem to be a perceptible physical phenomenon. As pointed out in section 2.1, however, awe experiences can be directed towards abstract entities and need not be

perceptual. Thus, there is no reason to deny that we have introspective access to consciousness and can have an awe experience about it, regardless of whether it is a physical phenomenon or not. The controversy on the ontological status of consciousness does not matter for the claim that we can have awe experiences directed at consciousness (for a relevant discussion, see Section 4.2).[4]

3 The justificatory power of aesthetic awe

This section defends premise 1 of my argument, that an awe experience of an object provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the object is sublime.

Awe is an aesthetic emotion. It has recently been argued that emotional experiences serve to justify evaluative beliefs involving value properties, such as danger, injustice, or beauty (Pelser 2014; Tappolet 2016; Cowan 2016, 2018; Mitchell 2017; Vanello 2020; Harrison 2021a). To quote two examples:

> [I]t appears plausible to claim that when you feel the emotion of fear, say, this not only prompts you to believe that what you are afraid of is fearsome, but you are also prima facie justified in believing that what you are afraid of is fearsome. The emotion you feel constitutes a defeasible reason to believe that what you are afraid of is fearsome. (Tappolet 2016: 168)

Given that many of our experiences of value seem to be essentially emotional,

[4] One might suspect that my awe experience is not directed at consciousness itself but at certain properties of consciousness such as being enigmatic and contributing to well-being. My response is based on the analogy to the intentionality of perceptual experiences. When I see a cup in front of me, perhaps I pay attention to some properties of it, such as its shape and color. However, it is reasonable to say that *my perceptual experience is directed at the cup* through the awareness of those properties. Likewise, when I feel awe in attending to some specific properties of consciousness, it is reasonable to say that my awe experience is directed at consciousness through the awareness of those properties.

> understanding emotions as having epistemic justificatory force […] can help us make sense of the justification for many of our evaluative beliefs. How do we come to believe justifiedly (and, we might add, to know) that the Holocaust was an abominable injustice or that sunsets are beautiful? One plausible answer is that we directly experience the injustice of the Holocaust and the beauty of sunsets through our emotions (in particular, through indignation or moral horror and through a kind of aesthetic admiration or awe, respectively) and that our emotional perceptions justify our beliefs. (Pelser 2014: 113)

Such views are often called *epistemic sentimentalism*. Although there are many versions of epistemic sentimentalism, from radical to modest, this paper adopts a modest version, according to which emotion-involving experiences of X provide *prima facie* justification to believe that X has a relevant value property. The justification is *prima facie* in the sense that there may be some other evidence against believing that X has the relevant value property based on the emotion-involving experiences of X; such evidence is called "defeater" of the justificatory force of the emotion-involving experiences of X. This version of epistemic sentimentalism is modest in several respects. I will clarify it by explaining how it is modest.

First, our version of epistemic sentimentalism does not claim that an emotional experience of X can *independently* provide *prima facie* justification to believe that X has a relevant value property, *without epistemic support from its experiential bases* such as perceptual experiences and imaginative experiences. Suppose that I face a wasp in a garden and feel fear. The fearful feeling occurs based on my perceptual experience representing a wasp; the perceptual experience works as an experiential base of the fearful experience. Perhaps the fearful experience can provide *prima facie* justification to believe that the wasp is dangerous only with epistemic support from the basing perceptual experience, which provides *prima facie* justification to believe that a wasp is present. In

other words, the fearful experience provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the wasp is dangerous *only in combination with* the basing perceptual experience. This consideration does not conflict with our version of epistemic sentimentalism, because our version focuses not on *pure emotional experiences* but on *emotion-involving experiences*, which can be the mixture of emotional and other kinds of experiences.

Relevantly, our version of epistemic sentimentalism can accommodate the dependence of the justificatory force of emotion-involving experiences on background doxastic and non-doxastic conditions. Perhaps my fearful experience of a wasp can provide *prima facie* justification to believe that the wasp is dangerous only when I have a justified background belief that wasps are aggressive, partly because my fearful experience is not rationalized without that belief (for a relevant discussion, see Cowan (2018)). Likewise, my fearful experience of a wasp may be able to *prima facie* justify the belief that the wasp is dangerous only when I have an emotional skill to have fearful experiences appropriately in response to the presence of something dangerous (Harrison 2021b), partly because my fearful experiences are unreliable if I do not have the emotional skill. Although it is controversial whether such dependence holds, our version of epistemic sentimentalism has the potential to accommodate it by extending the notion of emotion-involving experiences to include relevant doxastic and non-doxastic conditions. That is to say, it is open to accepting that emotional-involving experience of X can provide *prima facie* justification to believe that X has relevant value properties *only in combination with* relevant doxastic and non-doxastic conditions. For instance, it may be that my fearful experience of a wasp can provide *prima facie* justification to believe that the wasp is dangerous only in combination with the background belief that wasps are aggressive and the emotional skill mentioned above.

Second, our version of epistemic sentimentalism does *not* presuppose that emotional experiences are *necessary* for justifying evaluative beliefs. It is compatible with the view that evaluative beliefs can be justified without referring to emotional

experiences, for instance through a priori reasoning.

Third, our version of epistemic sentimentalism is not committed to the foundationalist position that emotional experiences work as unjustified justifiers of evaluative beliefs. It is compatible with the view that emotional experiences can be somehow justified and rationalized (more on this below).

Fourth, our version of epistemic sentimentalism is neutral to *how* emotion-involving experiences play the justificatory role. There are many possible accounts of how emotional experiences of X provide *prima facie* justification to believe that X has a relevant value property. For example, we may explain it in representationalist terms, stating that an emotional experience *prima facie* justifies an evaluative belief that X has a relevant value property because it represents X as seeming to have the value property with presentational force (Harrison 2021b). Alternatively, we may explain it in terms of acquaintance, stating that an emotional experience *prima facie* justifies an evaluative belief that X has a relevant value property because we are acquainted with X and its value property in having the emotional experience (Ballard 2021). We may simply appeal to reliabilist considerations, stating that an emotional experience serves as *prima facie* evidence for the presence of a relevant value property because the emotional experience makes the presence of it more likely than its absence. We may adopt a "constitutive sentimentalism" according to which value properties are in part constituted by emotional experiences (e.g, the beauty of X is in part constituted by the fact that we have aesthetically pleasant experiences directed at X), stating that an emotional experience of X serves as *prima facie* evidence for the presence of a relevant value property because the emotional experience in part constitutes the value property. The point is that our version of epistemic sentimentalism does not presuppose but is compatible with any account of how emotion-involving experiences of X provide *prima facie* justification to believe that X has a relevant value property.

I have so far explained in what respects our version of epistemic sentimentalism is

modest. Importantly, it seems to be modest enough to be *a default position* in that the burden of proof lies with its opponents rather than proponents. Our version of epistemic sentimentalism only states that emotion-involving experiences of X provide *prima facie* justification for the corresponding evaluative beliefs. While there is much debate among proponents of epistemic sentimentalism over *how* emotion-involving experiences play the justificatory role and how strong the emotion-based justification is, such debates presuppose that emotion-involving experiences provide *prima facie* justification to evaluative beliefs. Certainly, there can be several challenges to less modest versions of epistemic sentimentalism. However, such challenges are not applied to the modest version of epistemic sentimentalism.

To show this, let us take as an example *the foundationalist version of epistemic sentimentalism* and a famous challenge to it, namely *the challenge from reason-responsiveness.* The foundationalist version of epistemic sentimentalism states that emotional experiences can provide *prima facie foundational* justification for evaluative beliefs, where that means that the emotional experiences do not need to be themselves justified to justify evaluative beliefs. The challenge from reason-responsiveness is, simply put, as follows. It's widely accepted that emotional experiences are reason-responsive in that they can be evaluated as rational or irrational (Brady 2013; Magalotti and Kriegel 2021).[5] For instance, having a feeling of fear can be evaluated as rational if there is good reason to have it, for instance, that an out-of-control truck is heading one's way. In contrast, it can be evaluated as irrational if there is no good reason to have it, for instance, when a black cat walks by. The reason-responsiveness seems to imply that a fearful experience can provide justification to believe that something fearsome is present only when having it is rational, that is, when there is a good reason to have it. However, if we need a good reason to have a fearful experience in order for it to justify the evaluative

[5] Not everyone accepts the reason-responsiveness of emotional experiences. For instance, Gubka (2021) argues against it.

belief, then the justification cannot be foundational. Therefore, the foundationalist version of epistemic sentimentalism is untenable.

I do not further discuss whether this challenge succeeds and how the foundationalist version of epistemic sentimentalism should respond to it (for this, see Mitchell 2017; Cowan 2018). Rather, I want to emphasize that the challenge from reason-responsiveness does not apply to our modest version of epistemic sentimentalism, because the latter is not committed to the claim that emotional experiences play the foundational justificatory role.

Furthermore, our modest version can treat cases in which there is no good reason to have an emotional experience as cases where there is a defeater of the justificatory force of the emotional experience. For instance, a fearful experience provides *prima facie* justification to believe that something fearsome is present and one of the potential defeaters is the realization that there is no good reason to have it. When I have a fear experience about X, the fear experience provides *prima facie* justification to believe that something fearsome is present. However, if I inspect X and introspect my own doxastic conditions afterward and realize that there is no good reason feel fear toward X, then the realization works as a defeater of the *prima facie* justification provided by my fear experience.

I have so far argued that our version of epistemic sentimentalism is so modest that it seems a default position. And indeed, I do not see any specific objection to it, except the outdated implausible view that emotion is just an obstacle to our epistemic activities in general. Thus, it is reasonable to accept our modest version of epistemic sentimentalism unless a specific objection is presented. In what follows, I simply use the label "epistemic sentimentalism" to mean the modest version for convenience.

Epistemic sentimentalism can be applied to awe experiences. As shown in the fact that awe experience is treated as equivalent to the experience of sublime (Section 2), it is plausible to think that awe experience is directed at the value property of sublimity in the

same way as fear experience is directed at the value property of dangerousness (Konečni 2011; Kriegel 2023). We can thus conclude that awe experiences provide *prima facie* justification to believe in the presence of something sublime. For instance, my awe-involving experience about the Icelandic wilderness provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the Icelandic wilderness is sublime, and likewise, my awe experience about consciousness provides *prima facie* justification to believe that consciousness is sublime.

I close this section with two notes for clarification. First, epistemic sentimentalism implies that my *personal* awe experience about consciousness can provide *prima facie* justification to believe that it is sublime. I can gain *prima facie* justification to believe that there is an apple in front of me on the basis of perceiving it, even though no other people perceive it. Likewise, I can gain *prima facie* justification to believe that the snake in front of me is dangerous on the basis of feeling fear toward it, even though no other people feel fear toward it. It is highly unreasonable to say that my beliefs are not *prima facie* justified because they are merely my personal experiences. Given this, I do not have to survey how other people feel about consciousness in order to gain *prima facie* justification to believe that consciousness is sublime. Rather, the fact that I have an awe experience about it is sufficient to provide *me* with *prima facie* justification to believe it is sublime. Note that this is not to say that my personal awe experience provides *decisive* or *ultima facie* justification for that belief. The *prima facie* justification can be defeated by how other people feel about consciousness (See Section 4.1).

Second, epistemic sentimentalism does not presuppose any specific ontological relation between awe experiences and sublimity. The ontological relation between aesthetic experiences and aesthetic value has been much discussed in aesthetics. Some claim that the aesthetic value of an object is mainly constituted by aesthetic experiences of it (Goldman 2005; Stecker 2006; Peacocke 2021). Some put less emphasis on the role of aesthetic experiences in the analysis of aesthetic value, focusing instead on social practices and community (Lopes 2017; Riggle 2022). Some may even claim that the

aesthetic value of an object is ontologically independent from the aesthetic experiences of it (Hanson 2018; Evers 2019), as the danger of an object is ontologically independent from the fearful experiences of it. Epistemic sentimentalism is neutral on such debates, and thus on the ontological relationship between awe experience and sublimity. What this paper focuses on is the *epistemic relation*, rather than the ontological one, between awe experience and sublimity.

4 Possible defeaters

The previous section argued that an awe experience of an object provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the object is sublime. This section argues for premise 3 of my overall argument, namely, that there is no good defeater of the justificatory force of my feeling of awe for the sublime of consciousness.

There are at least two possible defeaters to the justificatory force of my awe experience about consciousness. The first is that *most people do not regard consciousness as sublime*. The second candidate is the possibility that *the alleged sublimity of consciousness is not grounded in physical properties*, whereas standard instances of the sublime do. I will discuss each candidate in turn, concluding that both do not work.

4.1 The first candidate

The first possible defeater can be presented through analogy. Suppose I feel strong aesthetic pleasure in gum spit out on the street. The aesthetic pleasure may provide *prima facie* justification to believe that gum stuck onto the street is beautiful. However, most people neither feel aesthetic pleasure in gum stuck on the street nor judge that it is beautiful. Even if they are asked to aesthetically evaluate gum stuck on the street, they would not judge that it is beautiful; rather, they would judge that it is ugly and disgusting.

This fact works as a defeater of the justificatory force of my aesthetic pleasure toward gum stuck on the street, since it suggests that my aesthetic pleasure is an outlier, not a reliable indicator of beauty. Given this, the *prima facie* justification provided by my aesthetic pleasure is defeated.

The same seems to hold for my awe experience about consciousness. It provides *prima facie* justification to believe that consciousness is sublime. However, most people are unlikely to have any awe experience or opinion about consciousness. In other words, most people do not regard consciousness as sublime either in experiential or doxastic senses. Furthermore, even if they are asked to aesthetically evaluate consciousness, they are likely to be just bewildered by that request because consciousness is not considered as a typical object of aesthetic appreciation. This could be taken to suggest that my sense of awe toward consciousness is an outlier, not a reliable indicator of sublimity. Given this, the *prima facie* justification provided by my awe experience is defeated.[6]

Here is my response. There is a significant disanalogy between the cases of gum and consciousness. In the case of gum stuck on the street, most people would positively judge that it is ugly, disgusting, and at least not beautiful if asked to aesthetically evaluate it. Put formally, the following conditional holds: for most people, *if* they are asked to aesthetically evaluate gum stuck on the street, they *would* have some aesthetic experiences incompatible with aesthetic pleasure, such as feelings of ugliness and disgust, and would thereby judge that it is not beautiful. It is this conditional fact that constitutes a promising defeater of the justificatory force of my aesthetic pleasure. In the case of consciousness, in contrast, most people would *not* positively judge that it is not sublime even if asked to aesthetically evaluate it; probably they are just perplexed by that question. In other words, the following conditional does *not* hold: for most people, if they are asked

[6] This paper assumes that most people do not have awe experiences about consciousness. Perhaps, however, many people may have felt awe toward consciousness at some point of development, as I was in awe of the fact that I existed as a conscious being in childhood. If this is the case, the first possible defeater disappears. For a relevant discussion, see Niikawa and Kriegel (forthcoming).

to aesthetically evaluate consciousness, they would have some aesthetic experience incompatible with a feeling of awe, such as feelings of insignificance and boredom, and would thereby judge that it is not sublime. It is this conditional which, if it held, would constitute a defeater of the justificatory force of my awe experience. However, it does not hold. Thus, the *prima facie* justification provided by my awe experience about consciousness is not defeated.

One may further object that if consciousness is an appropriate object of awe experience, it is puzzling why most people do not have any aesthetic experience about consciousness. This makes sense if consciousness is only assessable to few people, as a hidden great painting is. However, most conscious people can get access to their own consciousness through introspection. Given this, if consciousness is an appropriate object of awe experience, many people should have an awe experience about consciousness when attending to it. The fact that most people do not seems to show that the antecedent does not hold, namely that consciousness is not an appropriate object of awe.

Here is my response to this objection. Aesthetic experiences do not occur when we introspect on our own conscious experience *for practical reasons*, such as for examining our psychological conditions. We can have an aesthetic experience about consciousness only when we introspect it with the attitude of aesthetic appreciation. In addition to taking the general attitude of aesthetic appreciation, we need to attend to (at least some of) the three awe-inspiring features of consciousness, namely its ontological mystery, its relation to well-being, and its phenomenological complexity, in order to have an awe experience directed at it. This attentional mode requires a high level of understanding about consciousness, namely that consciousness is enigmatic, that consciousness makes our lives (more) meaningful, and that consciousness is phenomenologically complex. The absence of such understanding explains why most people do not properly attend to the awe-inspiring features of consciousness and consequently do not feel awe about consciousness.

It should be noted that it is not easy to acquire such understanding about consciousness. In order to understand the mysteries of consciousness, for instance, many of us probably need to seriously learn some basics of the philosophy of consciousness, including the debates over its ontological status. Perhaps some talented people can intuitively grasp that consciousness is enigmatic without such education, but most people are probably not like them. In order to understand the phenomenological complexity of consciousness, many of us probably need to carefully introspect on our own conscious experiences with the help of literature describing the structures and contents of conscious experiences. Perhaps some talented people can introspectively enjoy the phenomenological harmony of consciousness without any guidance, but most people are probably not like them. This is analogous to the fact that many of us need to learn art history and art criticism to appropriately appreciate contemporary artworks and to have fitting aesthetic pleasure/displeasure in it. To this extent, having an awe experience toward consciousness can be thought of as an aesthetic *achievement*, something that requires effort and talent and does not come easy to us (Nanay 2022).

Relevantly, we do not *always* feel awe when considering the three features of consciousness; even I do not. For instance, when I reflect on how to deal with the explanatory gap between consciousness and physical properties, I do not feel awe in consciousness. This is because I do not take the attitude of aesthetic appreciation but the attitude of philosophical investigation. The absence of the attitude of aesthetic appreciation explains why philosophers do not always feel awe in consciousness even when they attend to (some of) the three features of consciousness.

If aesthetically competent people with the required understanding of consciousness did not have awe experiences when introspectively attending to the three features of consciousness with the attitude of aesthetic appreciation, that *would* constitute a promising defeater of the justificatory force of my awe experience about consciousness. For it would show that my sense/ability of aesthetic appreciation (in particular, the sense

of awe) is radically different from that of aesthetically competent people, suggesting that mine is unreliable as an indicator of aesthetic value (in particular sublimity). However, the burden of proof lies with the sceptics here: they have to show that such competent observers, with the right understanding and right attitude, do indeed fail to experience awe while attending to the aforementioned three features of consciousness. My awe experience about consciousness provides justification to believe that consciousness is sublime unless such a defeater is *actually* presented.

It is worth emphasizing that this is not an easy task, because an unthoughtful casual observation of conscious experiences which does not elicit an awe experience is not enough as a promising defeater. The fact that introspecting on consciousness without proper competence and cognitive effort does not tend to cause any awe experience is analogous to the fact that looking at a contemporary artwork without proper competence and cognitive effort does not tend to cause any aesthetic pleasure and displeasure. Neither fact suggests that the artwork and consciousness lack the relevant aesthetic value.

Relevantly, suppose it turns out that there is a disagreement between two camps of aesthetically competent people, one in awe of consciousness and the other not. Would such a disagreement suspend the justificatory force of the proponent camp's awe experiences about consciousness (Dorsch 2007)? It depends, again, on whether this disagreement is rooted in the difference in the attitudes and understanding brought to the task by each camp. If only one camp takes toward consciousness the attitude of aesthetic appreciation with the required understanding of the awe-inspiring features of consciousness, then the mere existence of the other camp does not constitute a promising defeater. Indeed, as Gorodeisky and Marcus (2022) suggest, the opponent camp may be able to be guided to have an awe experience about consciousness and the disagreement may dissolve.

4.2 The second candidate

Let us move to another kind of possible defeater to the justificatory force of my awe experience, which concerns *the ontological ground of sublimity*. Many value properties seem to be (at least partially) grounded in physical properties. For instance, the danger of a cliff seems to be partially grounded in its height and the conditions of its bottom. The well-balancedness of a sculpture seems to be partially grounded in the combination of its size, shape and texture. If a value property is not grounded in any physical property of its apparent instance even partially, it might be argued, it becomes mysterious how the value property can be instantiated there. This leads to the illusionist claim that the appearance of the value property is illusory, meaning that the value property is not instantiated in its apparent instance in reality. For instance, even if one experiences a sculpture as well-balanced, if collective aesthetic inspection shows that it actually lacks any set of physical features that are considered to ground well-balancedness, it is reasonable to conclude that the experience is illusory in that the sculpture is actually not well-balanced. The illusionist claim serves as an obvious defeater of the justificatory force of a corresponding emotional experience for the presence of a relevant value property. Even though an emotional experience provides *prima facie* justification to believe that a relevant value property is instantiated in an entity, if it turns out that the value property is not instantiated there, the *prima facie* justification provided by the emotional experience is defeated.

Given this, let us turn to sublimity. Certainly, there are some apparent instances of sublimity for which it is relatively clear what physical properties partially ground it. For instance, the sublimity of Icelandic landscape seems to be partially grounded in its geological features. However, it is far less clear what physical properties can ground the sublimity of consciousness, even partially. First, it is under dispute whether consciousness *has* physical grounds. If consciousness itself is not grounded in physical properties, it would follow that the sublimity of consciousness is also not grounded in physical

properties. Furthermore, even if consciousness itself is partially grounded in physical properties, such as neural properties, its sublimity does not seem to be even partially grounded in such physical properties. This is because it is unclear how the three awe-inspiring features of consciousness, and in particular the mystery of consciousness and the connection between consciousness and well-being, can be reductively characterized as (a set of) physical properties like neural properties. This consideration may lead to the illusionist claim that although my awe experience represents consciousness as sublime, the appearance is illusory in that consciousness does not actually instantiate sublimity. If the illusionist claim is correct, the *prima facie* justification provided by my awe experience about consciousness is defeated.

Here is my response. The whole argument relies on a version of ontological physicalism according to which, for any property, it can be instantiated in an entity only if it is at least partially grounded in some physical properties of that entity. We can reasonably deny this version of ontological physicalism by pointing out that its scope is too broad. Ontological physicalism seems to be a promising option *for properties that can be instantiated only in concrete entities with spatiotemporal profiles*. For instance, it may hold for shape properties like squareness and teleological properties like aiming for survival. If such properties are not grounded in the physical properties of their apparent instance even partially, it strongly suggests that the appearance of instantiation is illusory. However, it does not seem to be a promising option for *properties that can also be instantiated in abstract entities.* For instance, *simplicity* and *parsimoniousness* are normative properties attributed to scientific and metaphysical theories. Since such theories are arguably abstract entities, there are cases in which simplicity and parsimoniousness are instantiated in existing entities but not grounded in their physical properties even partially. Given this, ontological physicalism should be restricted to properties that can be instantiated only in concrete entities.

This modified version of ontological physicalism seems plausible, but it does not

serve as a defeater of the justificatory force of my awe experience for the presence of sublimity. Sublimity is out of the scope of the modified ontological physicalism, because it can also be instantiated by abstract entities such as mathematical laws as mentioned in Section 2. Even though the three awe-inspiring features of consciousness are not grounded in any physical property, there is no problem with thinking that we can emotionally and cognitively respond to such features as we can to various abstract entities such as mathematical laws and metaphysical theories. In conclusion, even if the sublimity of consciousness is not grounded in any physical property, it does not constitute a promising defeater of the *prima facie* justification provided by my awe experience about consciousness.

5 Sublime and Ethics

I have so far argued for three premises: (1) An awe experience of an object provides *prima facie* justification to believe that the object is sublime (Section 3). (2) I have an awe experience about consciousness through introspecting some features of consciousness (Section 2). (3) There is no good defeater of the justificatory force of my feeling of awe for the sublime of consciousness (Section 4). I conclude from this that I am justified in judging that consciousness is sublime. To generalize this, we are justified in judging that consciousness is sublime. I offer this judgement as a promising hypothesis to be inspected among the community of philosophers and other researchers.

I close this paper by discussing an ethical implication of the hypothesis that consciousness is sublime. In environmental ethics, some have attempted to support environmental conservation based on the aesthetic value of nature (Shapshay, Tenen, and Carlson 2018). For example, Brady argues that "[t]he admiration we feel for nature through an aesthetic form of valuing can feed into attitudes of moral respect for the places we find sublime" (2013: 203). Such environmental ethicists present the sublimity of great

nature as a reason for giving moral consideration for it.

Given that consciousness is sublime, we can directly apply the same idea to conscious subjects, stating that the sublimity of consciousness provides a reason for giving moral considerations for conscious subjects. As I will explain below, this sublimity-based argument for moral consideration provides a new perspective on the debate over the moral significance of consciousness.

According to a standard view, the moral significance of consciousness consists in the capacities to have positively and negatively valenced conscious experiences (Shepherd 2018), because it is supposed that valenced experiences constitute experiential interests that directly morally matter and there is nothing left about consciousness that directly morally matters (Lee 2019). Thus, the standard view states that if a conscious subject can have valenced experiences, we ought to treat them a certain way, namely to avoid inducing negatively valenced experiences in them and (less demandingly perhaps) to induce positively valenced experiences. It follows from this view that if a conscious subject can only have valence-free ("hedonically neutral") experiences, they do not deserve moral consideration.

Some, however, have cast doubt on this standard view by underlining an intuition that even though a conscious subject can only have valence-free experiences, it may be morally bad to kill them in certain circumstances (Chalmers 2022). Suppose that there exist *valence-zombies*, which cannot have valenced experiences but can have rich valence-free experiences such as representational perceptual experiences and sophisticated conscious thoughts. Intuitively, it seems morally wrong (or even monstrous) to kill valence-zombies "to save an hour on the way to work" (Chalmers 2022: 344). However, Chalmers (2022) does not provide further theoretical account of why valence-zombies deserve moral considerations. Although our intuition may tell us that even valence-zombies deserve moral consideration, it remains unclear *why* they do.

Here the sublimity of consciousness provides a theoretical account of why even

valence-zombies deserve moral consideration, thus *explaining* the intuition that they do. Since such subjects have consciousness and consciousness is sublime, they bear sublimity through the possession of consciousness. Thus, to kill them means to eliminate instances of sublimity. This is analogous to destroying pieces of sublime nature. As long as eliminating an instance of sublimity is morally bad, as in the case of great nature, to kill conscious subjects is morally bad, regardless of whether they can have valenced experiences.

In this way, the hypothesis that consciousness is sublime provides a new perspective on the moral significance of consciousness. This leads to further ethical questions: even though it is morally good to preserve instances of sublimity, is it also morally good to increase the number of instances of sublimity? Is there any other way to violate the sublimity of consciousness than to eliminate its instance? If yes, is it morally bad to do so? It is beyond the scope of this paper to address such questions. What I want to emphasize is that the discussion in this paper has not only aesthetic but also ethical import.

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