

The sublime of consciousness

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Abstract. The aesthetic tradition has identified as paradigmatically sublime such objects as imposing mountains and intense storms, as well as monumental art. But the tradition also acknowledges less paradigmatic cases, including sometimes mathematical structures or abstract concepts. In this paper, we argue that there is also a case for considering phenomenal consciousness – the experiential quality of subjective awareness – as a sublime phenomenon. One appreciates this, we argue, when one is struck by (fitting) awe upon contemplating (a) the perplexing existence of something like phenomenal consciousness in an otherwise completely material universe and (b) the role of consciousness in injecting meaning and value in an otherwise brutally factual reality.

1 Introduction

Recent work on consciousness has supplemented metaphysical concerns surrounding the mind-body problem and epistemological concerns surrounding introspective self-knowledge with axiological concerns surrounding the *value* of consciousness (for review, see Kriegel, 2019). There is

a traditional interest within the philosophy of mind and cognitive science in the cognitive and evolutionary value of consciousness, which continues to garner attention (Graziano, 2019; Kanai et al., 2019). But more recent work has focused increasingly on the *epistemic* (Smithies, 2019; Ranalli, 2021), *prudential* (van der Deijl, 2019; Kriegel, forthcoming), and *ethical* value of consciousness (Niikawa, 2018; Shepherd, 2018; Siewert, 2021; Chalmers, 2022 Chapters 17-18).

One type of value the putative instantiation of which by consciousness has *not*, to our knowledge, been explored in any systematic way is *aesthetic* value. Are there, for instance, conscious experiences which are *beautiful*? Might all conscious experience be in some sense or at some level beautiful? Are there aesthetic values other than beauty that some or all conscious experiences instantiate? These are some of the questions that an *aesthetics of consciousness* would address.

It is important to distinguish the "aesthetics of consciousness" in this sense from more general questions about the role(s) consciousness might play in aesthetics. There are various views in aesthetics that give conscious experience an important role in aesthetic judgement and appreciation (notably "aesthetic hedonism" - see, e.g.,

Matthen, 2017, 2018) or even in the constitution of aesthetic value. In the sentimentalist tradition, for instance, an object's having aesthetic value is analyzed in terms of the conscious experiences the object is disposed to elicit in the right kind of subject (e.g., a Humean "true judge") under the right conditions (e.g., of distraction-free contemplation in the right attitude). However, the aesthetic value thus constituted, according to this tradition, is still an aesthetic value that *other things* instantiate or may instantiate, not an aesthetic value *of* consciousness. If, for instance, a sculpture is beautiful in virtue of tending to elicit, say, "visual delight" (Matravers, 2003) in the right subjects under the right conditions, the conscious experience of visual delight plays a constitutive role in making this sculpture beautiful, but it is *the sculpture* which is thereby made beautiful - it is not the experience of visual delight that is thereby made beautiful. The question that interests us here is whether conscious experience *itself* has some aesthetic value.

We will argue for an affirmative answer. More specifically, we will argue that consciousness instantiates the aesthetic value of *sublimity*, insofar as the existence of consciousness in what otherwise appears to be a purely

physical world merits being met with awe. More precisely, our argument, to a first approximation, is this:

- (1) For any x , x is sublime if and only if it is fitting to be awed by (i.e., to feel awe about) the existence of x ;
- (2) It is fitting to be awed by (feel awe about) the existence of consciousness in our world; therefore,
- (3) Consciousness is sublime.

Call this the *argument from fitting awe*. In §2, we defend the first premise of this argument, and in §3, the second.

Why should it matter whether consciousness is sublime or not? For several reasons. First, as noted philosophers of mind have recently been much exercised about the epistemic and ethical value of consciousness; it should matter *to them* if consciousness also instantiates *aesthetic* value. Second, if consciousness is sublime, this could inform discussions of the ethics of producing manmade conscious artifacts, a topic of increasing relevance in ethical debates surrounding AI and cerebral organoids (small-scale self-organizing brain-like tissues developed from stem cells in petri dishes, which exhibit more and more of the neural characteristics of “naturally evolved”

brains - see Niikawa et al., 2022). Most importantly, however, we think that, if sublime, consciousness would be an interesting and important instance, insofar as it would constitute a categorically new kind of sublime object relative to the objects so designated in the aesthetic tradition. Just as expanding the sphere of the sublime from natural phenomena to artworks is more significant than, say, adding Olympus Mons to the list on which we find the Grand Canyon, Mount Fuji, and so on, so expanding the sphere of the sublime from material objects such as mountains and artworks to a mental phenomenon expands our conception of the sublime in new and intriguing ways. This is not a matter of adding to our list of the sublime a new *token*, but a new *type* of phenomenon. Just by way of dotting our Is and crossing our Ts, let us state explicitly that the notion of consciousness that concerns us here is the notion of *phenomenal* consciousness, that is, the notion of an experiential, subjective feel that "there is something it is like" for a subject to have (Nagel, 1974). There are other notions of consciousness, notably various functionally defined notions, and the phenomena these pick out need have nothing particularly sublime about them. (There is a question, of course, as to whether phenomenal consciousness is ultimately reducible to, or grounded in,

some functional phenomenon, and whether this would make any awe with it unfitting. We will address this matter in §3.1.)

2 Sublimity and Fitting Awe

It is a fixture of traditional discussions of the sublime that the sublime is that which is “awe-inspiring” (see Brady 2013 for a thorough survey, but more recently also Arcangeli and Dokic, 2021; Clewis, 2021; Shapshay, 2021a). We interpret the basic idea to mean not that everybody who beholds Mount Fuji is inescapably subdued into awe, but only that, (a) if anyone were to feel awe upon beholding Mount Fuji, that would be a fitting emotional reaction for them to experience in the circumstance, and (b) if it were *unfitting* for people to feel awe upon beholding Mount Fuji, it would be senseless to insist that Mount Fuji is nonetheless sublime. This can be condensed into the claim that something is sublime if and only if it is fitting to be awed by it.

There may be a case for pinning down a specific *kind* of awe here, such that only *that* awe is the fitting reaction to the sublime. For the word “awe” can be used in any number of ways, including for things that do not seem

sublime (you can be awed by a colleague's sense of departmental service without finding it "sublime"). Some authors have introduced the notion of "aesthetic awe" (Clewis, 2021; Kriegel, 2023) to allow precisely for that. Moving forward, when we speak of awe we should be understood to mean specifically aesthetic awe.

What does this kind of awe amount to? Extensionally speaking, we recognize paradigmatic instances in experiences directed at monumental natural phenomena such as Mount Fuji or the Grand Canyon, but also directed at such artefacts as monumental art and monumental "manmade" structures (Shapshay, 2021b). And as Rachel Fredericks (2018) argues, it can even be directed towards abstract entities, including mathematical structures and arresting concepts such as "human rights" (when first encountered, at least). What do these various experiences have in common? To appreciate the *character* of awe (in the sense of aesthetic awe), it may be useful to bring to your mind a concrete moment in which you were awed by something, or alternatively, to induce in yourself a fresh experience of awe (we recommend watching <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoW8Tf7hTGA>).

Interestingly, several characteristics seem to recur in discussions of awe. They include notably:

- (i) *Ungraspability*: awe experiences involve a desire to understand or grasp their objects, and more deeply to somehow “dominate” them in thought and feeling - but this desire is typically not fully satisfied, with a residual feeling of ungraspability persisting.
- (ii) *Overwhelmingness*: awe represents the object of experience as overwhelming, grand, or majestic, with the subject typically experiencing themselves as comparatively small or insignificant.
- (iii) *Partial Ambivalence*: even though awe is overall more pleasant than unpleasant, it does involve, like nostalgia and other “bittersweet” emotions, both positively and negatively valenced affect, somehow cohabiting in one experience; still, the positive affect is typically dominant in awe.

To be clear, this is not meant as an exhaustive list, and some features listed may characterize *prototypical* awe experiences rather than *all* awe experiences.

As a biconditional, the claim that something is sublime if and only if it is a fitting object of (aesthetic) awe is silent on the order of explanation. Is it fitting to be

awed by Mount Fuji because Mount Fuji is sublime, or is Mount Fuji sublime precisely because it is fitting to be awed by it? The biconditional does not take a stand. On a *value-first* view, of the kind defended by traditional objectivists (see, e.g., Zangwill, 2001), it is fitting to be awed by Mount Fuji because Mount Fuji is sublime; it is then an independent question what *makes* it sublime (it might be the combination of its natural, “descriptive” properties, or its non-natural, intrinsically evaluative properties, or something else). On a *fittingness-first* view, Mount Fuji is sublime because it is fitting to be awed by it (for its sublimity *consists in* the fittingness of the awe reaction to it); it is then a separate question what makes the awe fitting – more on this soon (see Peacocke, 2021 and Kriegel, 2023 for recent fittingness-first views of aesthetic value in general). On a no-priority view, fitting awe and sublimity “go together” but neither is more fundamental than, or explains, the other (see Gorodeisky, 2019, 2021 for a no-priority view about aesthetic value and merited aesthetic experience).¹

All three views are consistent with the biconditional,

¹ To be clear, the authors we are citing here are not discussing priority relations between the sublime and fitting awe in particular (except Kriegel, 2023), but more generally priority relations between aesthetic value and fitting, or appropriate, or merited aesthetic experience more generally.

then. It is important to appreciate, however, that the notion of fittingness matures differently depending on whether one takes a value-first or a fittingness-first reading of the biconditional. (We set aside no-priority views, which are hard to interpret on this point.) For a value-firster, fittingness will ultimately amount to *accuracy* or *veridicality*: an awe experience is understood to involve a kind of affective attribution of sublimity to its object, and is considered fitting just if the object is in fact sublime, making the attribution veridical. This notion of fittingness-as-veridicality is unavailable to the fittingness-firster, however, since for them there is no independent fact of the matter as to whether anything instantiates sublimity. On the contrary, whether something is sublime will be *fixed* by whether it is fitting to feel awe toward that thing.

What, then, is the notion of fittingness operative in fittingness-first approaches? There are a number of substantial *theories* on this, which we will briefly enumerate for the sake of exhaustiveness. But from a dialectical standpoint, it might be better to work with a comparatively theory-free, "surface-level" elucidation that could be shared across different theoretical perspectives; we will offer one momentarily. The main theories are:

- (a) *Balance of reasons*: Awe is fitting when the balance of reasons recommends feeling awe.²
- (b) *Ideal spectator*: Awe is fitting when that is what an ideal spectator would feel.³
- (c) *Primitivism*: Whenever awe is fitting, it is a brute and inexplicable fact that it is – you cannot “get underneath” fittingness. This is where aesthetic-normative explanations end.⁴

As noted, we do not wish to take a stand on which of these is most plausible. Instead, we will provide a “surface-level” characterization of fittingness to which theorists of all three persuasions could be amenable.

The basic idea is that to call an emotional reaction

² In ethics, this kind of “reasons first” view was ascendant in the first 15 years or so of the 21st century, thanks in large part to Tim Scanlon’s (1998) work. Mark Schroeder (2012) offers specifically a balance-of-reasons account of ethical fittingness. The aesthetic analogue of such “reasons first” has started to be explored only recently (see notably King, 2022).

³ This view is traditionally associated in Hume in aesthetics, and has had analogues developed in the ethical domain, mostly in the mid-20th century (see notably Firth, 1952). There are open questions in this tradition about what makes a spectator “ideal” in the relevant sense. Hume famously claimed that the “true critic” is distinguished by “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (Hume 1757: 229). Note that this does not amount to perfection or omniscience.

⁴ This is the pure form of “fittingness first,” defended in Anglophone moral philosophy for the first time by A.C. Ewing (1939) and recently imported into aesthetics (Kriegel, 2023).

to some x fitting is to say that that is the right emotion for one to have toward x given the information at one's disposal. For instance, to say that it was fitting for visitors at a zoo where a tiger became loose to feel fear is to say that fear was the right emotional reaction for them to have once they became aware of this regrettable state of affairs. And to say that it is *unfitting* to be angry at a distant acquaintance forgetting your birthday is to say that anger is not the right emotional reaction to have toward the acquaintance's lapse given what one knows about the psychology and sociology of distant-acquaintance relationships.

To appreciate the independence of this notion of fittingness from the veridicality notion, consider scenarios where the two may come apart. Consider first a brain in a vat who has an experience as of a red strawberry because the scientists controlling its neural stimulation have "fed it" retinal and cortical stimulation that characteristically generates red-strawberry experiences. This envatted brain's strawberry experience is not veridical, but it is still, in some clear sense, the right experience for it to have given the stimulation it has received. Conversely, imagine a man on the streets of New York, in a state of total hallucination, "seeing" purple

swans everywhere, who happens to stumble across a surprisingly purple-dyed swan on the corner of 5th Ave. and 42nd St.; we may tell the story in such a way that this real purple swan "walks into" the exact region of space in which the man hallucinates one of his purple swans. As a result, the man's hallucination is veridical, but being completely unresponsive to the information the man's perceptual organs provide him with, it is in some sense not the right visual experience for him to have.

The sense in which the purple-swan hallucination is not the right experience to have, but the red-strawberry experience is, captures a sense of fittingness separate from accuracy: a sense having to do with what experience is the right one for a subject to have given the input they have been presented with or information they possess. This characterization, we propose, can be accepted by balance-of-reasons, ideal-spectator, and primitivist theorists of fittingness alike.

It is interesting to note a certain asymmetry between the legitimacy or usefulness of the value-firster's and fittingness-firster's notions of fittingness. For a fittingness-firster, there is no use whatsoever in the notion of fittingness as veridicality, since on their view there is no independent fact of the matter for us to

represent, veridically or otherwise. However, a value-firster could find the fittingness-firster's notion perfectly legitimate - not as *replacement* for the notion of fittingness-as-veridicality, of course, but as *addition* to it. For instance, a value-firster can accept that although the envatted brain's strawberry experience is not fitting in one sense, since there is no strawberry anywhere about, it *is* fitting in another sense, the sense just explicated. Indeed, although value-firsters cannot accept that awe at x which is fitting in this sense is *constitutive* of sublimity, they can and perhaps should hold that such awe is often and perhaps typically *symptomatic* of sublimity, and so may serve as *prima facie* evidence of sublimity.

In what follows, we will be working with this independent notion of fittingness, the notion of the fittingness-firster, for the following reasons. First, as just noted it is the more widely acceptable notion of fittingness, and can be useful within a value-first framework as well; whereas the notion of fittingness as veridicality is of no use in a fittingness-first framework. Secondly, *if* the value-firster is right, then making the case either for or against the claim that consciousness is sublime will be very difficult, and will probably involve the somewhat opaque intuitionist epistemology objectivists

often rely on (see, classically, Moore, 1903). In contrast, thirdly, if we can establish that awe at consciousness is fitting in the veridicality-independent notion of fittingness, this could be leveraged to show that consciousness is sublime given the fittingness-first view, and may still serve as *prima facie* evidence of consciousness being sublime within the value-first view.

3 Consciousness and Fitting Awe

The purpose of this section is to argue that awe is the right emotional reaction to feel toward the existence of consciousness – that upon contemplation of consciousness and the fact of its existence in nature as we otherwise know it (that is, as we know it to be when we bracket the existence of consciousness), feeling awe is perfectly fitting.

It is obviously not part of our claim that the majority of human beings are overcome with awe when they think of conscious experience, or even that philosophers who professionally concern themselves with consciousness's place in nature do their research in a continual state of awe. Rather, what we have in mind is this: it is *possible*, for someone who concerns themselves with consciousness and

its place in nature, when contemplating this topic with the right attitude, to enter a state of awe as a result of their contemplation; and when one does enter the state of awe in this way, it is a fitting feeling for one to have. (What is the "right attitude"? Without entering complex debates about the kind of "aesthetic attitude" that Dickie (1964) famously argued was a philosophers' myth, we can all agree that there exists an attitude, or several attitudes, more contemplative than problem-solving-y, which we can take toward objects and ideas, and which can help enhance our aesthetic engagement with them.⁵)

We can report that both of us have in fact entered that state of awe at various moments in our lives, both before becoming professional philosophers and, with some regularity, since. It may also be interesting to put on the record that both of us have higher credence in physicalism than in anti-physicalism, though both of us are conflicted on this topic.⁶ We trust that some other philosophers, and many non-philosophers of a curious and reflective bent,

⁵ When Robert Stecker (2006, p. 4) speaks 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," he is describing the kind of attitude we have in mind, though taken toward plastic art more specifically.

⁶ David Papineau once told one of us that he has 99% credence in the truth of physicalism. We are, psychologically speaking, a different breed of physicalist-leaning philosopher, loitering more often in the area of 51-65% credence.

have on occasion experienced a similar kind of awe upon contemplation of consciousness and its place in nature. What we will try to do in this section is to get into the "anatomy" of this awe reaction, and in doing so bring out its fittingness.

Recall that awe is characterized recurringly in terms of three elements, which we called Ungraspability, Overwhelmingness, and Partial Ambivalence. The next three subsections are dedicated to showing that each of these elements in awe is fitting toward the existence of consciousness.

Before starting, though, we would like to consider the potential objection that consciousness is not enough of an aesthetic *object* to be a basis for aesthetic awe. In response, we would like to make two observations. First, one view, by no means absurd, is that *anything* is a *potential* aesthetic object, in that we always *can*, more or less at will, mentally relate to something through the lens of aesthetic appreciation. Secondly, while people often introspect their conscious experience for instrumental reasons - with a certain purpose in mind - there is also a more contemplative and potentially aesthetic mode of introspective engagement with one's ongoing experience that one can take. When we introspect our bodily phenomenology

to get a sense of our level of stress, for instance, we are engaged in the former, more practical mode of introspection. But meditators often report adopting a more detached, non-instrumental mode of introspection, wherein they contemplate their passing sensations and impressions for no other purpose than to "be with them." This contemplative, non-instrumental mode of introspection is presumably open to all of us, if not very natural to us in our busy modern lifestyle. Within this contemplative stance, however, it is not difficult to imagine adopting an aesthetic mode of introspection wherein the passing sensations, impressions, feelings, and thoughts become the objects of aesthetic interest and appreciation.

3.1. Consciousness and Ungraspability

Put very roughly, the feeling of ungraspability comes into the picture, for us, when we pass from *thinking* the explanatory gap to *feeling* the explanatory gap.⁷ When we contemplate vividly the fact that the universe appears to be made up entirely of elementary particles buzzing in mostly empty space and interacting under a closed system of

⁷ We are referring here to Joseph Levine's (2011) notion of an explanatory gap between physical reality and conscious awareness. As we will see momentarily, there are many other articulations of the basic idea in philosophy.

strict objective laws, it seems quite unfathomable how subjective experiential feels can exist in such a world: when you consider something like the experiential feel of tasting a rare scotch whiskey unfolding over 3-4 seconds, or what it is like to think through an objection from a referee or a colleague,⁸ your mind simply cannot make intelligible the existence of such things in a void sparsely populated by minuscule packets of matter-energy.

This phenomenon, of the intellectual appearance of an explanatory gap, is of course quite familiar to working philosophers. What we would like to insist on, though, is that *feeling* this explanatory gap, while it *can* occur downstream from philosophical education, is a feeling that often also occurs upstream and independently from it. Through philosophical education, the feeling no doubt sharpens and gains definition. Like other fine feelings, it is *enriched* by our greater capacity to conceptualize it and put it in words, if only to ourselves. Nonetheless, it is not necessary to be "indoctrinated into" an intellectual milieu to be overcome by this feeling. Many people, including the two of us, report experiencing an archetypal version of the relevant perplexity as philosophically

⁸ We are assuming here that there *is* something it is like to think, a phenomenology of cognition, as argued nowadays by many authors (see Bayne and Montague, 2011 for a dedicated collection of articles).

inclined but academically ignorant teenagers. Moreover, many historical expressions of the explanatory gap come to us from thinkers who were *not* embedded in an intellectual milieu as obsessed with “the problem of consciousness” as recent analytic philosophy has been. Leibniz was not addressing himself to surrounding academic expectations when he wrote his famous mill passage in §17 of the *Monadology*:

Suppose that there were a machine so constructed as to produce thought, feeling, and perception. We could imagine it increased in size while retaining the same proportions, so that one could enter it as one might a mill. On going inside, we should only see the parts impinging upon one another; we should not see anything which would explain a perception. (Leibniz, 1714/1973, p. 181)

Likewise for Thomas Huxley writing in the following century:

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, p. 210)

Around the same time, John Tyndall, a prominent British *mathematician*, who presumably was not addressing himself to the mathematical community at all, but giving expression to his endogenous feelings, mused thus:

Were our minds and senses so expanded, strengthened, and illuminated as to enable us to see and feel the very molecules of the brain; were we capable of following all their motions, all their groupings, all their electric discharges, if such there be; and were we intimately acquainted with the corresponding states of thought and feeling, we should be as far as ever from the solution to the problem, 'How are these physical processes connected with the facts of consciousness?' The chasm between the two classes of phenomena would still remain intellectually impassable. (Tyndall, 1874, quoted in Tennant, 2007, p. 753)

One may speculate that these lively articulations of the explanatory gap come to us from authors who have written under the influence of a *vividly felt* sense of ungraspability.

It is important to appreciate that feeling the explanatory gap is not the same thing as accepting, all things considered, that there *is* an (ultimate and unbridgeable) explanatory gap, much less that mind-body

dualism follows. In general, feeling something is separate from endorsing the feeling. A person may recognize in themselves a feeling of resentment toward someone persisting at least some time after having heard a satisfying explanation of the seemingly offending behaviour. A truck driver who runs over a child who jumped into the street out of nowhere, and who could not have done anything about it, may well *feel* guilt for years, even as they realize they are guiltless (Williams, 1981). What happens in such cases is that we *feel* resentment, guilt, or whatever, but do not *endorse* the feeling. In the case of feeling the explanatory gap, this is a particularly realistic phenomenon: anecdotally at least, philosophers of very different persuasions report experiencing the kind of awe we have been discussing.

David Chalmers (2003) distinguishes between "type-A" and "type-B" materialists. Type-B materialists recognize that there is an in-principle-unbridgeable explanatory gap between physical reality and consciousness, and only argue that nothing follows *ontologically*: the physical facts do necessitate the phenomenal facts, it's just that this necessitation is epistemically inscrutable to us. Such a materialist would, of course, find it *fitting* to be struck with the ungraspability of consciousness's existence in a

purely material world. It is in fact *part of their view* that this is the right feeling for us to have given our epistemic situation.

More interestingly, even a type-A materialist is likely to admit this, however. For the type-A materialist, our impression of an explanatory gap is due to missing knowledge about brain functioning and/or conceptual and inferential limitations; a perfectly rational and sufficiently well-informed subject could, in principle, *derive* the phenomenal facts from the physical facts, thus *explaining* why the phenomenal facts are as they are given that the physical facts are as they are.⁹ Given this outlook, a type-A materialist could and perhaps should hold that the impression of an explanatory gap is entirely appropriate for us *given the way we fall short of being perfectly rational and sufficiently well-informed*. For creatures with our knowledge and conceptual-cum-inferential capacities, it is *fitting* to find it ungraspable how there could be such a thing as conscious experience in the austere physical world portrayed by fundamental physics. It is only for creatures much better positioned, epistemically

⁹ The specification "sufficiently well-informed" is supposed to definitionally impart on the subject knowledge of all physical facts and all phenomenal facts but no knowledge of the relationships between the former and the latter. The idea is that such a subject would be able to *figure out* the necessary connections between physical and phenomenal facts: that is type-A materialism.

speaking, that the explanatory gap disappears.

We conclude that on almost any view on the problem of consciousness, there is a warranted appearance of an explanatory gap between consciousness and the rest of nature as we otherwise know it. This makes the felt ungraspability of the existence of consciousness in nature fitting for creatures like us: it is the right experience for creatures like us to have when contemplating the existence of consciousness.

3.2. Consciousness and overwhelmingness

When we deal with the physical sublime, the sense of overwhelmingness it inspires is grounded in its physical magnitude. But physical magnitude is not an attribute of consciousness: there is no *size* conscious experience is. What we want to suggest, however, is that in the case of consciousness the sense of overwhelmingness has to do with the magnitude of consciousness's *importance* or *significance*.

In a certain frame of mind, we can experience the all-importance of consciousness when reflecting on the state of the cosmos before the emergence of consciousness. In all likelihood, consciousness has emerged at some we-

know-not-which point in the course of evolution.¹⁰ What was nature like before that point? When we see representations of the early universe in nature documentaries, we are typically shown dark skies over an arid earth punctured by local eruptions of all manners of hot liquid; a noiseless wind passes over the prairies and the whole universe is “asleep” in an inanimate, soulless state. Presumably, at some (relatively not-too-distant) point conscious awareness has appeared on the scene. This is the moment of the “universe waking up.” It is only starting that moment that *anything mattered*. In its dormant, pre-conscious state, the universe as a whole was essentially like a big rock, or scattered collection of rocks: nothing mattered, nothing had any significance for anything. *Meaningfulness* came on only with the injection of consciousness into reality.

As we pursue this line of contemplation, it may well happen that we are suddenly deeply struck by the *overwhelming significance* of consciousness. Consider: the main thing that causes awe in us when we watch the video mentioned in §2 is the enormity of the cosmos. But there is nothing more enormous in *significance* than the universe *waking up* - than things starting to *matter*. Nothing “bigger” has ever happened.

¹⁰ For discussion of this, see for instance Ginsburg and Jablonka, 2019.

As before, we would like to stress that being affected by the enormity of consciousness's significance is not a matter of simply holding various philosophical positions. There *is* the philosophical position that a world without consciousness is a world without value - a view explicitly defended, for instance, by William Seager:

An obvious thought experimental approach is to imagine universes in which consciousness does not or even *cannot* exist. Consider a range of such universes differing in a host of various properties. That is, imagine worlds differing in their basic laws and constants of nature and hence differing in their emergent properties, such as whether stars exist or not, whether the universe collapses back into a singularity within a microsecond or not, etc. The experiment requires that in all the worlds under consideration, it is impossible for consciousness to exist or to emerge in them. With this body of universes in mind, let us try to rank them in terms of intrinsic value. Which universe would be best? They all seem equally and totally empty of value in themselves (Seager, 2001, pp. 3-4)

But Seager is presumably giving theoretical expression to something he (also) felt pre-theoretically. Note, in any

case, that philosophers who argue *against* the kind of outlook expressed by Seager typically take themselves to argue against pre-philosophical intuition (see, e.g., Levy, 2014, Bradford, 2023). In other words, they themselves consider the Seager outlook an expression of a natural pre-philosophical sensibility.

Arguably, this sensibility finds expression not only in philosophical texts but also in art and literature. Walt Whitman, speaking of phenomenal consciousness, we suspect, under the label "the soul" (not somebody specific's soul, but the soul *as such*, so to speak), sermons as follows in "Song of the Exposition":

While we rehearse our measureless wealth, it is for thee, dear Mother!

We own it all and several to-day indissoluble in Thee;

-Think not our chant, our show, merely for products gross, or lucre

-it is for Thee, the Soul, electric, spiritual!

Our farms, inventions, crops, we own in Thee! cities and States in Thee!

Our freedom all in Thee! our very lives in Thee!

In Whitman's outlook, everything has merely *instrumental* value but the phenomenal "electricity" of consciousness. That is the only thing to be valued *for its own sake*, and functions as the source of value for everything else.

Given that consciousness is not a directly *visible* feature, it might seem harder to conceive of any possible representations of its transcendent value through visual art. In the still-life painting tradition, however, there is a thread that tries to leverage scenes where a lingering suspicion of potential presence of conscious life creates a shudder in the spectator, an uncomfortable feeling of "maybe there is *somebody home*." Consider Zurbarán's "Agnus Dei" from circa 1640 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Francisco de Zurbarán, "Agnus Dei"

The lamb's feet are tied as if it is certainly dead, but its eyes do not in fact seem entirely shut, and something

about the expression on its face gives the spectator a frisson of potential consciousness. The reason the spectator is unsettled is that the ambiguity concerns something of first importance: if the lamb is still alive and conscious, it is still part of the moral universe, putting some demands on us (we are not morally permitted to torture it, for instance); whereas if there is "nobody home" the cadavre has no moral status.¹¹

We bring up these examples to drive home the point that feeling the "game-changing enormity" of consciousness's significance is something that can happen to a reflective individual outside and independently of the context of philosophical theorizing. It is a natural affective experience that has a spontaneous life outside any narrow academic context.

3.3. Consciousness and Partial Ambivalence

In this subsection, we describe how a partially ambivalent feeling occurs as part of the awe directed at consciousness, more specifically in contemplating the ungraspability and the overwhelmingness of consciousness.

¹¹ Note, incidentally, that this is the sacrificial lamb, a concrete embodiment on Earth of innocent divinity from which, in the Christian tradition, all value flows.

Reflecting on the mysteries of consciousness leading to the ungraspability of consciousness, we have a feeling of *intellectual delight*. This intellectual delight resembles a feeling we have when contemplating other great mysteries, such as the incongruous portrayal of nature in quantum mechanics or the relativity of space and time. When we first learn that where we see the sun is not where it is but where it was eight minutes ago, for instance, we feel a certain intellectual delight or excitement; which we may feel afresh when we learn that in 1604 a supernova was visible in Europe for three weeks that had occurred 13,000 years earlier (13,000 light years away!). What this feeling of delight "says," so to speak, is that *this world is not intellectually boring*.

Likewise, when reflecting on the overwhelming significance of consciousness - that nothing matters without consciousness - we realize that, quite surprisingly, it is *we ourselves* who are the ones who make the world valuable by instantiating consciousness. This provides us with a feeling we may call *existential delight*, which resembles a positive feeling one has when knowing that our existence makes someone's life (more) meaningful (our parents', our children's, etc.), but is much more dramatic.

In this way, the feelings of ungraspability and overwhelmingness we feel toward consciousness, when experienced each on its own, lead to positively valenced affect. However, when reflecting on the ungraspability and overwhelmingness of consciousness *conjointly*, a *negatively* valenced affect becomes fitting as well. For we then realize that although consciousness seems incomparably significant for our life, and is the source of all value and meaning in the world, we cannot grasp why it exists at all, indeed how its existence is possible in our physical world. And this means that we cannot even grasp why and how any meaning or value exists in our world.

Arguably, being conscious is essential to making us what we are. Compare a scenario (A) in which you lose conscious awareness and become a behaviourally indistinguishable zombie for the rest of your life, with a scenario (B) in which your existence comes to an end but you are instantly replaced by someone else who happens to be physically and behaviourally indistinguishable from you but is a zombie lacking any conscious awareness. It is hard to see in what way (A) is preferable as compared to (B), or indeed in what way it is a genuinely different scenario. This suggests that our conscious awareness is essential to us and losing it is tantamount to something like death.

Insofar as we cannot understand why and how there is consciousness in the world, then, we effectively cannot understand why and how we are what we are.

This double incomprehension - of why and how there is anything of value or meaning in the world, and of why and how we are what we are - leads to a decidedly unpleasant feeling, an intellectual bitterness of sorts. What we feel is that our intellect is so limited that we are even ignorant of what matters most: why and how we are what we are and why and how anything matters. This feeling of our own cognitive limitedness, and our inability to dominate in thought the most fundamental aspects of our existence and the existence of value and meaning, naturally breeds the sort of feeling of smallness or personal insignificance so often cited in classic discussions of the sublime.

In this way, a partially ambivalent feeling arises naturally when we reflect on the ungraspability and the overwhelmingness of consciousness, because the appropriate feeling here contains both intellectual delight or excitement on the one hand and a kind of bitterness on the other.

Our description of how this partially ambivalent feeling arises naturally in this context is intended to show that this feeling is rational or apt for creatures

like us when contemplating consciousness and its place in nature. To that extent, it suggests that this part of awe directed at consciousness, too, is fitting.

3.4. Consciousness and Awe

In summary. When we imagine feeling in tandem both the overwhelming significance of consciousness as the source of all value and meaning, and the ungraspability of its existence in a world made up entirely of buzzing minuscule packets of matter-energy, the experience we imagine is overall a rewarding and to that extent positively valenced one; nonetheless, it incorporates the kind of frisson of discomfort characteristic of encountering that which eludes complete domination in thought and feeling, which shades into bitterness when we realize that what we fail to understand here is nothing less than our own nature and the source of all value and meaning. The resulting affective cocktail, if you will, is just what the experiential core of the awe experience consists in. Our claim is that this experience is perfectly fitting when directed at consciousness.

Importantly, it does not follow that every awe at the existence of consciousness must be fitting. Awe fuelled by

mysterianist or superstitious wishful thinking may not be fitting, and awe experienced as a result a hammer falling on one's head will definitely not be.

It is also worth noting that the fittingness of (the right kind of) awe at consciousness does not entail the unfittingness of *lack* of awe at consciousness. For instance, failure to feel awe that comes from failure to contemplate consciousness's place in nature in the first place, itself rooted in lack of interest in the topic, is not criticizable *affectively*; some may wish to label this a failure of curiosity, but first, this would not obviously be an *affective* deficiency, and second, it is hard to make general judgements on how much curiosity and about what topics is appropriate for human beings *in abstracto*. Engineers can be fascinated by problems that leave philosophers completely cold, and this does not seem like ground for criticism of philosophers.

4 Conclusion: Consciousness is Sublime

We conclude that it is possible and natural to experience awe upon contemplating the fact that such a thing as phenomenal consciousness (a) exists in a cosmos we

otherwise know to be nothing but an enormous lump of matter, and (b) has injected meaning and value into that lump; and that this awe experience is a perfectly fitting experience - the right experience for us to have upon vividly contemplating these matters.

If this awe experience is fitting, and if awe experience is fitting just when its object is sublime, then phenomenal consciousness instantiates at least one aesthetic value: the sublime. Our overall argument may be represented as follows:

- (1) Something is sublime if and only if it is fitting to feel awe about its existence;
- (2) The feeling of awe features centrally (a) a sense of ungraspability, (b) a sense of overwhelmingness, and (c) affective ambivalence;
- (3) It is fitting to experience a sense of ungraspability when we contemplate the existence of phenomenal consciousness in a world made up entirely of elementary particles;
- (4) It is fitting to experience a sense of overwhelmingness when we consider the role of consciousness in injecting meaning and value into the world;
- (5) It is fitting to have a partially ambivalent

- feeling when we consider the ungraspability and overwhelmingness of consciousness conjointly; thus,
- (6) It is fitting to experience awe upon contemplating phenomenal consciousness (from 2-5); therefore,
- (7) Consciousness is sublime (from 1 and 6).

If we are right, then in its focus on colossal physical phenomena and complex abstract structures, the aesthetic tradition has neglected a completely different type of sublime - the sublime of consciousness. The argument presented here makes a preliminary case for the inclusion of consciousness too, as the source and ground of meaning and value, in our official "inventory of the sublime."

The sublimity of consciousness is consistent, of course, with consciousness being also beautiful, elegant, compelling, and so on. A mature "aesthetic of consciousness" would give a full theory of which aesthetic values are instantiated by which types of conscious experience. As noted, work on such issues has been nearly nonexistent both in aesthetics and in philosophy of consciousness.¹² Interestingly, however, for these other aesthetic values, it is antecedently much more plausible

¹² The only article of relevance we are familiar with is Sherri Irvin 2008, which argues that some bodily experiences are fitting objects of aesthetic attention.

that at most *some* types of conscious experience have them, not *all* conscious experiences. Very intricate insights, fine sentiments, or deep sensations may exhibit a kind of beauty, for instance, that brutish thoughts and crude emotions do not. But with sublimity it is consciousness as such, rather than specific *types* of conscious experience, that seems to carry the value.

This is important given that some philosophers, such as Andrew Lee (2018), have argued against the *ethical* value of consciousness precisely on the grounds that it is not consciousness as *such* which is ethically valuable, but only certain *kinds* of consciousness. Even if Lee is right about ethical value, then, we have argued that there is still *some* value that consciousness as *such* exhibits, namely, the aesthetic value we call the sublime.¹³

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