Can Emotions Have Abstract Objects? The Example of Awe

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Abstract: Can we feel emotions about abstract objects, assuming that abstract objects exist? I argue that at least some emotions can have abstract objects as their intentional objects and discuss why this conclusion is not just trivially true. Through critical engagement with the work of Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, I devote special attention to awe, an emotion that is particularly well suited to show that some emotions can be about either concrete or abstract objects. In responding to a possible objection, according to which we can only feel emotions about things that we take to matter to our flourishing, and thus cannot feel emotions about causally inefficacious abstract objects, I explore how abstract objects can be relevant to human flourishing and discuss some emotions other than awe that can be about abstract objects. I finish by explaining some reasons why my conclusion matters, including the fact that it presents a challenge to perceptual theories of emotion and causal theories of intentionality.

1. Introduction

At the risk of proving myself an insufferable nerd, I admit that occasionally, when I set all distractions aside and ponder something like the Law of Non-Contradiction, *The Rite of Spring* (not any specific performance or recording of it, but the repeatable artwork itself), the Fibonacci sequence (as manifested in, but not identical to, certain beautiful natural objects), or the set of all uncountable sets, I feel something intensely pleasant, and somehow simultaneously uncomfortable. I feel amazed and intrigued that such things exist. I want to understand or otherwise engage with them, but worry that they outstrip my powers of comprehension and appreciation. I ask myself many questions, like whether I can grasp their meaning and significance. I feel excitement and a sort of inadequacy while doing so. Thus, it seems that I occasionally feel something like awe for these apparently abstract objects. But are things as they seem?

Emotions are, to speak loosely, feelings about things. Some types of emotions can be about a wide array of things. For example, we can fear things as diverse as our death, dogs, murderers, and microbes. We can feel pride in our looks, labors, and loved ones. So clearly we feel emotions about concrete objects. Furthermore, many people agree that we feel emotions when and because we think their objects matter to our flourishing. But can we also feel emotions about abstract objects? If so, which emotions, and under what conditions?

I argue that some emotions need not be about concrete objects; they can be about abstract objects. I devote special attention to awe as an example of such an emotion. Then I consider and respond to an objection according to which we can only feel emotions about things that are causally efficacious. Finally, I discuss some of the important implications of my view, including the challenge it poses to perceptual theories of emotion and causal theories of intentionality.

2. Abstract Objects

I assume that there is at least one abstract object. Numbers, sets, and propositions are among the most commonly cited putative examples of abstract objects that philosophers discuss, but they seem relatively unlikely to be the objects of emotions, if any abstract objects are. In contrast, things like justice, *The Rite of Spring* and other repeatable artworks (themselves, not any particular performance or recording of them)*,* Navajo and other natural languages (themselves, not any particular expressions in them), and games like Go (themselves, not any particular instance or manifestation of them) are also often understood as abstract objects, and seem more likely to be the objects of emotions.

There are ongoing philosophical debates about whether abstract objects are characteristically non-spatial, non-sensible, mind-independent, outside of time or eternal, causally inefficacious, and/or mental abstractions.[[1]](#footnote-1) I cannot discuss in detail all the merits and drawbacks of those metaphysical views here, so I remain agnostic about exactly what an abstract object is, and thus just what, if anything, the putative examples listed above have in common.

Nevertheless, I think of the category of abstract objects as more inclusive than the category of transpersonal objects, as understood by Kristján Kristjánsson in his recent argument that awe takes a transpersonal object, which means that awe is about an ideal or idealization, rather than about oneself, another person, or an external event (2016: 11).[[2]](#footnote-2) However, while it makes sense to refer, as he does, to truth, beauty, and goodness as ideals, and while I would categorize those as abstract objects, not all abstract objects are ideals. For example, repeatable artworks, natural languages, and games are not ideals. Ideals are (high) standards. Neither languages, games, nor repeatable artworks are standards (though there are standards we must follow to properly instantiate or manifest them).[[3]](#footnote-3) So, in what follows, I aim to diverge from Kristjánsson in two main ways: first, by showing that not only can awe take transpersonal objects, it can take abstract objects that might not be transpersonal (and that certainly are not among those Kristjánsson discussed), and second, by identifying some other emotions that can also take abstract objects.

At this point, I should note that there are two senses in which one might think that it is trivially true that emotions can be about abstract objects. First, if (a) emotions are propositional attitudes (meaning attitudes the objects of which are propositions),[[4]](#footnote-4) and (b) propositions are abstract objects, then (c) *all* emotions have abstract objects. I reject (a), since it is too simplistic to say that emotions *just are* propositional attitudes (though propositional attitudes are components of emotions). But even if (a) and thus (c) were true, (c) is different from, and would not establish, my thesis. I am asking whether emotions can be about abstract objects in a sense that contrasts with everyday claims like “I fear corpses,” or “I am grateful for this food.” I want to show that emotions can be about abstract objects in just the same way that such phrases imply that they can be about concrete ones.

The second way in which my conclusion might seem trivially true relies on the idea that emotions have what are called formal objects. Formal objects are posited to explain what all emotions of a given type have in common; for example, people suggest that all anger is about offensiveness (its formal object). If (i) all emotions are about their formal objects, (ii) those formal objects are properties, and (iii) properties are abstract objects, then, again, (iv) all emotions have abstract objects.[[5]](#footnote-5) But again, (iv) is different from my conclusion, since it employs a technical notion of an emotion’s object, whereas my conclusion is about an emotion’s object in a colloquial sense.[[6]](#footnote-6)

3. Emotions

I assume that emotions are intentional states; so, emotions are about things, their objects. I also hold a (somewhat) cognitive theory of emotions. However, the cognitions involved in emotions need not be full-blown beliefs; they need only be relevantly belief-like. We can feel fear when we do not necessarily believe that the snake on the path is venomous, but merely suspect or entertain the thought that it might be, or even simply represent it “as if” it were venomous.

In addition to their cognitive components, emotions have conative components. For example, part of fear is the desire to avoid an apparent danger, and part of shame is the desire to conceal one’s own apparent flaws. Conative components give emotions their motivational power.

Emotions also have what can be called affective components, qualitative feels, or phenomenological aspects, which sometimes individuate emotions from the first-person perspective. For example, there is something it feels like to experience sadness, and that characteristic feeling is distinguishable from the characteristic feeling of amusement.

Finally, I assume that different emotion types are best individuated not by a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but by using a prototype theory, according to which emotional experiences of the same types bear family resemblances to each other.[[7]](#footnote-7) On such an analysis, emotion concepts are cluster concepts, and some emotional experiences are more or less prototypical than others. So, emotional experiences of the same type will not necessarily share *all* the same prototypical features, but they will share some, and the more similarities they share with other instances of their type, the more prototypical they are. This allows us to say that emotion types may be similar enough to overlap. For instance, awe is similar to emotions like wonder, surprise, and admiration.[[8]](#footnote-8) My concern is not to draw bright lines between these, but to focus on features that are prototypical of one emotion in this cluster (awe) in order to make a larger point about the kinds of objects that these and other emotions can be about. My primary motivation, unlike those whose work on awe I draw from, is to begin exploring the whole category of emotions about abstract objects.

4. Awe

To start, consider awe.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt point out, one of the challenges in conceptualizing awe is that a wide range of events and objects can trigger it (303). They include among the potential elicitors of awe powerful leaders, encounters with God, natural wonders, and artworks (305). But we cannot assume that the *cause* or *elicitor* of an emotion is always the same as its *object*.[[10]](#footnote-10) For example, someone’s careless comment may *cause* me to feel anger *about* a more substantial wrong committed previously. In other cases, my anger may be both caused by and about the same thing, like my being cheated. However, the wide range of possible causes of awe gives us a *prima facie* reason to believe that awe can take a wide range of objects. To determine whether that range includes abstract objects, we should investigate awe’s prototypical features.

Keltner and Haidt characterize awe as necessarily involving two appraisals: perceived vastness and a need for accommodation.[[11]](#footnote-11) The latter is the product of an “inability to assimilate an experience into current mental structures” (297), which means that “prototypical awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they [the subjects] fail to make sense of an experience of something vast” (304). The idea is that the subject of awe does not think her cognitive abilities are up to the challenge presented by the object of her awe.

Keltner and Haidt’s account of awe can benefit from some revisions, so in what follows, I modify it in three minor respects and specify three prototypical components of awe that it fails to adequately highlight. Regarding the first of the appraisals, ‘greatness’ is preferable to ‘vastness’ to avoid implying that it should be understood in spatial terms.[[12]](#footnote-12) For, as Keltner and Haidt (303) recognize, the objects of awe need not be spatially momentous. This possibility, of non-spatial greatness, is crucial for my purposes here. On my view, one component of awe is an attribution of substantial, if not overwhelming, *greatness* to its object. It could be greatness in beauty, power, moral status, creativity, strength, intelligence, or something else, but we do not feel awe about things the salient features of which we take to be puny or insignificant.

As for the second appraisal, the subject of awe represents herself as coming up short in the face of the object. Keltner and Haidt specify the shortcoming in terms of a perceived inability to make sense of awe’s object using the subject’s current mental structures, but we have good reason to leave it more open how she thinks of her shortcoming. Although subjects often struggle to understand the objects of their awe, and to some degree recognize that struggle, a subject’s appraisal of herself in comparison to the object of her awe might focus on her inferiority in power, size, or something else other than her cognitive capacities. I might feel awe while observing the mighty Pacific Ocean, focusing on my relative insignificance in size and power, without necessarily representing myself as lacking the cognitive capacity to understand the ocean’s greatness. Additionally, these comparative cognitions do not entail that subjects appraise themselves as failures; I do not take the ocean’s superiority to me in size and power as evidence that I have failed to meet any standard to which I could reasonably be held.

Moreover, Keltner and Haidt’s view can be improved by emphasizing that what they call “a need for accommodation” arises when we think we cannot *fully* accommodate an experience within our current mental structures. The ‘fully’ is key, because we *must* be able to *at least partially* accommodate an experience in our current mental structures to represent the object as great or vast, thereby forming the first appraisal.[[13]](#footnote-13) So on my view, prototypical feelings of awe also involve a second, comparative appraisal that represents the subject as somehow insignificant, small, or inferior in comparison to that great object, though not so cognitively limited as to prevent representing it as great. For if we represent ourselves as equal to or better than our athletic, political, or other opponents, we will not feel awe about their performance in games, debates, or other contests. This comparative cognition is less prototypical of mere wonder or admiration.

Keltner and Haidt’s own positive account says little about the conative and affective aspects of awe, which are equally important to our understanding of it. The affective component of awe is an intensely pleasant feeling, generally more intense than that involved in wonder or admiration, often verging on or shading into unpleasantness.[[14]](#footnote-14) This seems especially common in religious awe; subjects of such awe perceive what they take to be divine greatness, and, simply put, have their minds blown by trying to fit that perception into the paltry conceptual scheme provided by worldly experience. That such experiences involve ecstasy bordering on (or overlapping with) pain is unsurprising, since to the extent that one succeeds in grasping a truth previously beyond reach, the experience can be pleasant, but to the extent that one fails or has to adjust one’s mental framework, that experience can be unpleasant.[[15]](#footnote-15) Of course, awe is not reserved for apparently supernatural experiences; we can feel awe for heroes, natural wonders, and human creations when we find them sufficiently great and ourselves somehow falling short in comparison.

Although all emotions have a conative component, specifying the desire(s) involved in awe is difficult. Some characterize awe as involving a yearning for understanding of its object, as in curiosity or intense attention.[[16]](#footnote-16) Others characterize awe as involving a desire to submit or defer to the object of awe because of its apparent greatness.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the literature, these desires are frequently alluded to, but rarely the focus of discussion. I think that prototypical experiences of awe involve both desires, which helps account for how it can feel, alternately or simultaneously, pleasant and unpleasant.

So I disagree with Kristjánsson, who says, “The characteristic desire in awe is that of continuing to experience the emotion or experiencing it again, preferably more profoundly” (9). He does not motivate, explain, or defend that claim, and there are at least three reasons to doubt it. One problem is that it does not differentiate awe from other positively valenced emotions, since we generally want more of whichever emotions feel good. More importantly, it is a mistake to suggest that this desire is a *necessary* component of awe (or other positive emotions). If awe is sufficiently overwhelming, one might want to avoid experiencing it ever again, or if an awe-struck person is sufficiently caught up in the present moment, they might not be “distracted” by thinking about their feelings, but focused entirely on the object of awe and their relation to it. I admit that people who experience awe often want to experience more of it, but that desire is better characterized as a common product or consequence of awe, rather than a constitutive component of it. Furthermore, Kristjánsson’s account of awe’s conative component makes it hard to explain cases in which awe feels both pleasant and unpleasant.

In addition to avoiding the problems just mentioned, my view also makes the different components of awe into a more unified whole. Note that on Kristjánsson’s view, awe’s characteristic desire is reflexive or self-referential.[[18]](#footnote-18) For he claims that what the person feeling awe characteristically desires is awe itself – that in experiencing awe, the desiring component of one’s experience necessarily refers to that (type of) experience itself. In contrast, on my view, the object of the desires that partially constitute awe are the same as the objects of the cognitions that partially constitute awe; the object represented as great *is* the object that the subject desires to understand or engage with, which is *also* the object that the subject desires to shrink from, defer to, or avoid because it is represented as somehow superior to the subject (who thus also figures in both of awe’s characteristic desires). On my view, none of the cognitions or desires prototypical of awe represent awe itself – rather, they all represent the same object in relation to the subject.

So prototypical experiences of awe involve the following cognitive, affective, and conative components:

1. A mental representation of its object as substantially, if not overwhelmingly, great;
2. A mental representation of oneself as somehow insignificant, small, or inferior compared to that great object;
3. An intensely pleasant feeling, often verging on or shading into unpleasantness;
4. A desire to understand or otherwise engage with the object; and
5. A desire to submit to or avoid the object because of its apparent greatness.

5. Awe about Abstract Objects

Keltner and Haidt seem to recognize the possibility of feeling awe about abstract objects (but only implicitly) when they list a “grand theory” as a cognitive elicitor (and thus potentially an object) of awe (305).[[19]](#footnote-19) Even if the *contemplation* of the grand theory, not the grand theory itself, causes awe, the object of the awe could still be the theory itself, not the act of contemplation.

However, we need more than that suggestion to justify the claim that we can feel awe (or any other emotion) for an abstract object. Before arguing for that, I admit that emotions about abstract objects may be relatively rare. For while we might say that we feel, for example, grateful for justice or afraid of injustice, what we generally mean when we say such things is that we feel those emotions about specific *instances* of (in)justice. In such cases, we feel emotions about concrete things insofar as they are (un)just. (In)justice is not, strictly speaking, the object of those emotions; it is the aspect under which we feel emotions about concrete objects. So sometimes loose talk implies that our emotions are about abstract objects when they are not.[[20]](#footnote-20) This does not rule out the possibility that someone might feel an emotion like gratitude or hope when contemplating justice, without feeling it for any particular concrete instance or manifestation of justice. Similarly, someone might feel despair when contemplating ignorance, and the object of the despair might be abstract, a universal that unites all concrete instances of ignorance without itself being concrete.

To show that awe can be about abstract objects, I consider each component of awe in turn. The first cognitive component of awe attributes substantial greatness to its object. So consider the game of Go. Go has consistently challenged and fascinated millions of humans over thousands of years across numerous cultures, in part because it is both extremely simple (in its rules and playing materials) and incredibly complex (in the number of possible moves and board configurations). Thus, it can be seen as great in terms of its complexity, simplicity, enduring cultural importance, and so on.

Or consider the natural language of your choice. If we did not attribute greatness to our languages, it would be hard to make sense of why so many different people have thought that they set humans apart from, and hierarchically above, all other creatures. If we did not see our languages as great, they would not be so integral to our self-identities and we would not work so hard to preserve them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Abstract objects like wisdom, justice, and humor can also be seen as great, which helps explain why we pursue them to the extent that we do. However, given that I am using ‘greatness’ in its widest possible sense, we can also say that even abstract objects that we think of less favorably, like injustice and ignorance, can be seen as great; I certainly think they are great in their pervasiveness and perniciousness.

Now consider the other cognitive component of awe, which represents its subject as somehow insignificant, small, or inferior in comparison to its object. Generally, we feel awe for objects that we cannot, at present, fully understand. Whatever they are, abstract objects as such are certainly difficult to understand, and given the philosophical difficulties that must be faced to account for their nature, many of us are clearly unable to *fully* assimilate them into our current mental structures. For even if we are able to understand many abstract objects (like numbers) well enough for everyday purposes, that does not mean that we fully understand just what they are, whether and how they can be objects of knowledge, or how to answer other philosophical questions about them.

Understanding abstract objects might be difficult because our bodies are concrete and because most of our intentional states throughout our evolutionary history have had concrete objects, like food and family members (even if our beliefs and desires are not themselves concrete). Most everyday survival pressures do not demand that we contemplate abstract objects. So we should expect that abstract objects will sometimes test the limits of our mental structures, which seem best suited for contemplating concrete objects. Furthermore, as we try to understand abstract objects, we may notice how we differ from them, especially our limitations in time and space. Thus, it is not surprising that we might also find ourselves to be insignificant in comparison to abstract objects, and not just in ways having to do with our cognitive limitations.

If we attribute greatness to an abstract object, and we represent it as somehow superior to us, to be something that we need or want to, but maybe cannot yet fully accommodate in our present conceptual schemas, then it would make sense that we might also experience the desires characteristic of awe. It would make sense to want to engage with the object to deepen our understanding of it, and/or to be submissive relative to that great thing. When contemplating abstract objects like justice, mathematical laws, and languages, people can want to understand them (and, in the case of justice and the like, instantiate or embody them). Many of us, however, recognize our limitations relative to doing so, and thus in some sense want to submit to, defer to, shrink from, or avoid thinking about those abstract objects.

What of awe’s affective component? If a prototypical experience of awe is to have an abstract object, it has to amount to more than just the subject’s having those cognitions and desires; the subject must also feel something. Though I say more about this in the next section, the personal experiences with which I began indicate that awe’s characteristic affect can accompany the relevant thoughts and desires about abstract objects.[[22]](#footnote-22) So if, as I have argued, all of awe’s prototypical intentional components can be directed at abstract objects, while being accompanied by awe’s characteristic affect, then it is reasonable to conclude that we can indeed feel awe about abstract objects.[[23]](#footnote-23)

6. An Objection and Response

My position that emotions can take abstract objects may seem to conflict with eudaimonistic theories of emotions, like that defended by Martha Nussbaum (2001). She says that emotions are judgments about things that matter, subjectively speaking, to their subjects. On her view, it is because the objects of our emotions seem to us to matter to our flourishing that they elicit emotions, which Nussbaum, following Proust, characterizes as “upheavals of thought” (1). One might think that such a view clashes with mine, if one thinks that only concrete objects have the causal power to create the requisite upheavals of thought.[[24]](#footnote-24)

One possible response to this challenge is to deny eudaimonism about emotions, but since I find it highly plausible that we feel emotions only about things that we take to matter to our flourishing, I want to consider other responses. One option would be to say that even if abstract objects cannot *causally* impact our flourishing, they can, nevertheless, partially *constitute* our flourishing. For example, Kantians might say that human flourishing is at least partially constituted by contemplation of the moral law (an abstract object).[[25]](#footnote-25)

Whether or not abstract objects play a constitutive role in human flourishing (and I am not sure that they do), I can still respond to this challenge. For even if abstract objects are causally inefficacious (and that is a matter of debate), the *contemplation* of abstract objects can still be causally efficacious. Granted, we do not understand exactly *how* contemplation causes anything, but almost everyone (excepting epiphenomenalist and parallelist dualists) agrees that contemplation is physically causally efficacious somehow, and that its causal efficacy does not depend on the kind of object being contemplated. Furthermore, even epiphenomenalists and parallelists can agree that contemplation is mentally causally efficacious, and thus can agree that the contemplation of abstract objects could cause the mental phenomena that partially constitute or are causally necessary for our flourishing.

Moreover, even if abstract objects lack causal efficacy, people can certainly believe otherwise, and thus people could feel *irrational* emotions about abstract objects on the basis of false beliefs about abstract objects being causally efficacious in ways relevant to their flourishing. The possibility that all emotions about abstract objects are irrational brings to mind the paradox of fiction, which arises because it seems that (a) we must believe that objects exist to feel emotions about them, (b) when knowingly engaging with fictions, we do not believe that the objects depicted therein exist, and (c) we do feel emotions about the objects depicted therein when knowingly engaging with works of fiction.[[26]](#footnote-26) Those three claims appear to be inconsistent. While the literature on this paradox is too large to survey here, suffice it to say that philosophers have proposed various solutions to it, many of which preserve the intuition that we feel emotions about fictional things.[[27]](#footnote-27) Whether fictional things are causally inefficacious because they do not exist or because they are abstract objects, some of the strategies for dealing with the paradox of fiction could be used to bolster the claim that we can feel emotions (and maybe rational ones) about abstract objects even if those objects are causally inefficacious.

So abstract objects can be relevant to our flourishing even if they are causally inefficacious. Insofar as contemplating them brings us pleasure or knowledge, we can enhance our flourishing by doing so. Furthermore, if doing other things that we care about (like being an artist or professor) requires us to engage with abstract objects somehow, then again those abstract objects are relevant to our flourishing. It is even possible that engagement with abstract objects sets humans apart from other creatures, and thus that living a good, fully human life may even require engagement with abstract objects.[[28]](#footnote-28)

7. Other Emotions about Abstract Objects

We are now in a position to see how we might feel emotions other than awe about abstract objects. Consider, for instance, Lin-Manuel Miranda, who wrote the musical *Hamilton*. That repeatable artwork is clearly relevant to Miranda’s flourishing; it has garnered him widespread admiration and substantial financial rewards, and is evidence of his creativity and many other talents. So Miranda has reason to feel proud of *Hamilton*, which is, arguably, an abstract object.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Alternatively, someone might feel love or affection for an abstract object if they deem it crucial to what makes their life good. For example, the poet C.D. Wright (2009) describes herself and her favorite poets as “besotted by language,” and her comments can plausibly be interpreted as being about a love of language abstracted from any concrete expressions of it. Similarly, I have felt joy when first grasping certain philosophical arguments, and I feel fondness for other arguments because of how they have figured in my career and my inter-personal relationships.[[30]](#footnote-30) Scientists and mathematicians could feel similar emotions about the abstract equations and theories that they prove or rely on in constructing satisfying and productive careers and mental lives more generally. And in Plato’s *Symposium,* Socrates argues that we can and should love the forms, as opposed to concrete particulars.

However, we ought not think that we only feel positive emotions about abstract objects. We might feel hatred for certain ideologies, which are plausibly seen as abstract objects, whether or not we hate the concrete individuals who adhere to them. We might feel disgust for tropes that are used to denigrate people, even if those tropes are abstract objects.

These examples, taken together, suggest that contemplative, curious, reflective people who lead fairly privileged lives might be most *likely* to feel emotions about abstract objects.[[31]](#footnote-31) For people who are struggling to, for instance, avoid violence and find adequate nourishment might be less likely to spend their time contemplating, creating, or discovering abstract objects; in such situations, flourishing might depend much more centrally on meeting one’s concrete physical needs.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This is not to say that less privileged or less contemplative people cannot feel emotions about abstract objects. One need not be materially or socially privileged to be a brilliant abstract thinker or to have a wide range of emotions. While people do not share all the same priorities and preferences, nor the same concrete circumstances, we almost all share some need or desire for a mental life that we find fulfilling, and the contemplation of abstract objects can play a role in satisfying those very human needs and desires. So, while abstract objects might not contribute to our flourishing in exactly the same ways that concrete objects do, they can be salient to our flourishing nonetheless. If we care about our flourishing, then we should try to understand the range of things that can contribute to it.[[33]](#footnote-33) That is not a new idea, but we do not always recognize the power that our emotions have to reveal what matters to us, as is clear from the enduring appeal of views that represent emotions as things to be controlled by reason and, ideally, avoided.

8. Why It Matters

Recognizing that emotions can be about abstract objects is important for multiple reasons. First, we need theories that reflect and make sense of the full range of human emotions. So, among other things, philosophers of emotion should be discussing examples of emotions about abstract objects. Such examples are extremely rare in the philosophical literature, and not, to my knowledge, ever explicitly marked as such.

One of many possible reasons why philosophers have neglected such examples might be that, despite diminishing support for a rigid division between reason and emotion, many of us still sometimes (unconsciously, perhaps) think of emotions as opposed to reason or intellect. Highlighting emotions about abstract objects may help diminish that tendency. For, as mentioned, such emotions tend to have a more cerebral cast, so examples involving them are particularly good for demonstrating how blurry the boundary between reason and emotion really is, and how emotions and reason often work together.

Maybe more importantly, if we can feel emotions about abstract objects, and abstract objects are causally inefficacious, this challenges perceptual theories of emotion, which say either that emotions are perceptions or analogous to perceptions.[[34]](#footnote-34) For perception is causally constrained; the object of perception must play a causal role in the perception’s occurrence, otherwise you only *seem* to perceive it. So, perceptual theorists face a difficult choice. They can (a) reject the distinction between an emotion’s cause and its object, thereby denying that abstract objects (if they lack causal powers) can be the objects of emotions. But then they must explain why the examples above are, contrary to appearances, not emotions about abstract objects.

Or, they could (b) reject the distinction between an emotion’s cause and its object, but say that abstract objects *are* causally efficacious. Then they would need to explain how abstract objects could cause emotions, or anything else, which is a tall order.

Alternatively, perceptual theorists can (c) allow for a distinction between an emotion’s cause and its object, but say that unlike the objects of perceptions, the objects of emotions are not causally constrained. However, that weakens the analogy (or negates the identity) at the heart of their view.[[35]](#footnote-35)

My argument also poses a similar challenge to causal theories of intentionality. For if one accepts such a theory, one cannot accept all three of the following claims: (1) emotions are intentional states, (2) emotions can be about abstract objects, and (3) abstract objects are causally inefficacious. Unfortunately, I cannot fully explore my argument’s implications for perceptual theories of emotion and causal theories of intentionality within the scope of this paper, so I leave it those who endorse such views to consider how best to respond to these challenges.

9. Conclusion

To demonstrate that emotions can have abstract objects, I have argued that awe can be about abstract objects, and discussed some other emotions that can also have abstract objects. Along the way, I clarified why my conclusion is not trivially true, defended a modified version of Keltner and Haidt’s account of awe, and responded to a potential objection that abstract objects cannot matter to our flourishing, as it seems they must for us to feel emotions about them. While highlighting the philosophical value of attending to emotions about abstract objects, I also challenged both perceptual theories of emotion and causal theories of intentionality.

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1. For a survey of theories about the nature of abstract objects, see Rosen (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this substantial new philosophical contribution to the awe literature. In allowing for emotions with transpersonal objects, Kristjánsson diverges somewhat from Aristotle, but otherwise wants to remain as true to Aristotle as possible. Kristjánsson’s commitment to Aristotelianism, mid-article shift in focus from awe (the episodic emotion) to awe (the trait), and goal of morally justifying awe (the trait) constitute substantial differences from my project. Unlike Kristjánsson, my main goal is to illustrate a larger point about a whole class of emotions that take abstract intentional objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kristjánsson might say that awe can be about such things if they are idealizations. However, it is opaque what he means by ‘idealization,’ since that term only appears once in his article, without a definition. I think an idealization is a representation of something as ideal, and I do not think that things like repeatable artworks, natural languages, and games are necessarily representations of things as ideal or even representations of ideals themselves. Nevertheless, even if all the abstract objects that I want to discuss are appropriately classified as ideals or idealizations, and thus transpersonal objects in Kristjánsson’s sense, he does not engage with examples of emotions about a wide range of such things, as I aim to do here. Whether we classify emotions about repeatable artworks, languages, and games as emotions about ideals, idealizations, or neither, I think they are about abstract objects, and merit attention as such. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We can see the suggestion that emotions are propositional attitudes, for example, in Davidson (1976) and in Nussbaum (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On formal objects, and other things that lay some claim to being “the” object of an emotion, see de Sousa (1987: chapter 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. What I have in mind can be described using technical vocabulary, as in de Sousa (1987), who calls it an emotion’s “target,” and Teroni (2007), who calls it an emotion’s “particular object.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A syndrome analysis involves a similar strategy; for a nice example of a syndrome analysis of hope, see Martin (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Sherry (2013), who argues that wonder is a response to what seems extraordinary, and is often linked to other responses ranging from delight to dread, including awe. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and its famous discussion of the sublime might seem like a good starting place, Kant’s work is less useful for my purposes than one might suspect. For in the third *Critique*, Kant’s main tasks are to determine the constraints that bind the faculty of judgment and to show how aesthetic judgments can have universal validity despite being subjective. Kant describes these judgments as *disinterested* (albeit based on feelings of pleasure or displeasure). However, emotions are more than mere judgments and are not disinterested. Furthermore, while we might feel awe about the sublime, it is just one of many possible objects of awe. Moreover, Kant says that our experiences of the sublime are about our ideas of reason, and thus about objects internal to us, but I am concerned with the possibility of awe (and other emotions) about objects that are not necessarily internal to us, since many apparently abstract objects are also apparently mind-independent. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On this distinction, see Kenny (2003: 15–18 and 49–52), Deonna and Teroni (2012: 3), and Donnellan (1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sometimes they call these “appraisals” and sometimes “themes” or even “appraisal themes.” These terms originate in Lazarus’s work on “core relational themes” (1991), but are not synonymous. I stick with ‘appraisal,’ meaning an evaluative representation. Unfortunately, as other scientists have increasingly built on Keltner and Haidt (2003), they have understood the second “appraisal” rather differently. For example, Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker present it as a *desire* to make new knowledge structures (2012: 1131), but tell their research subjects that it is neither an appraisal of nor a desire for said structures, but the *alteration* of them caused by the appraisal of vastness (Ibid.: 1133). Valdesolo calls it a *process* (2014: 170). I strive to avoid that imprecision, partly by distinguishing five prototypical components of awe, not just two. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For different reasons to favor this revision, see Kristjánsson (7). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In a related discussion of wonder, Philip Fisher says, “Wonder is the middle condition between an unawakened intellect and a systematic knowledge so complete that there no longer exists anything unexpected” (1998: 58). See Sherry (2013: 344) on a difference of opinion between Richard Dawkins and Keats about whether feeling wonder about something is compatible with a scientific understanding of it. See Shelley (2014) on Alexander Gerard’s view of the sublime, and the point that “Sublime objects give pleasure because their sheer scale renders their conception just difficult enough.” See Rachel Zuckert (2003) on (a) Kant’s claims that we fail to comprehend the sublime via imagination, but can conceive of it through reason, hence the dual pleasure and displeasure involved in experiencing it (218) and (b) Johann Gottfried von Herder’s phenomenology of the feeling of the sublime as taking a narrative form, which begins with uncomprehending awe and ends in knowledgeable awe (220). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As Keltner and Haidt say, awe is at the “upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear” (297), which fits with Kant’s claims about experiences of the sublime. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Keltner and Haidt (2003: 304). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Keltner and Haidt cite Izard as one such person (2003: 302). Valdesolo and Graham (2014) attribute a similar view, according to which awe involves a desire to find meaning, to Kierkegaard and William James. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Keltner and Haidt find evidence of this view in Weber and Durkheim (2003: 299–300, 302, and 307–308). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kristjánsson emphasizes awe’s self-reflexivity explicitly in another context (8). However, his claim that awe is essentially self-reflexive (8) needs to be reconciled with his claim that awe directs attention away from the individual self (14). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kant’s famous quote about feeling awe for the starry heavens above and the moral law within also implicitly recognizes the possibility of feeling awe for an abstract object, under the plausible assumption that the moral law is an abstract object (1956: 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thanks to REDACTED for inquiring whether deities might be abstract objects, REDACTED for inquiring whether persons might be, and an anonymous referee for inquiring whether football clubs, countries, and political parties might be. I do not take a stand on those questions here, but if so, then feeling emotions about abstract objects would be more common (and widespread) than I had thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For another example, Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007: 945) recognize that we can think of mathematical equations, which are (arguably) abstract objects, as vast or great. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See also Goldie (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. My position is thus unlike Kristjánsson’s, since he seems to think that all instances of a given emotion type will take one and only one type of target: all pride is about the self, all compassion about other people, all fear about external events, and all awe about transpersonal ideals (11). In contrast, I think that some instances of awe have concrete intentional objects and others have abstract intentional objects (and the same goes for some other emotion types). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Keltner and Haidt, drawing on Durkheim, seem to agree that objects elicit awe at least in part because they can impact people’s well-being (2003: 300). Non-cognitivists, like Jesse Prinz, can also be eudaimonists and thus make a similar objection. For to distinguish between perceptions of bodily changes that *are* emotions and those that are not (like cold-induced shivers), Prinz (2004) says that emotions are the subset of perceptions that are characteristically caused by an organism entering a relation with the environment that bears on the organism’s well-being (which he calls a core relational theme). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Thanks to REDACTED for this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In this formulation of the paradox, I follow Schneider. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For citations, see Schneider: especially relevant is Moran (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. We might be justified in believing this even if we do not yet understand exactly *how* we engage with abstract objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The object of pride could be *Hamilton* itself, even if the cause were the fame and fortune it brought him, or the object of pride could be Miranda’s relation to *Hamilton*, which is also plausibly seen as an abstract object. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For an argument that arguments are abstract objects, see Simard Smith and Moldovan (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Behrendt (2010: 673) for the idea that fear of non-existence (which, if not an abstract object, is at least like one in lacking certain properties that concrete objects have) is a particularly contemplative emotion. Returning to awe and its cousins, Sherry (2013) repeatedly suggests that wonder is a contemplative or intellectual emotion. Shiota, Keltner, and Mossman (2007: 960) describe an empirical study that suggests “that awe-prone people are particularly comfortable revising their mental representations of the world.” It would be interesting to investigate whether the same is true of people prone to other emotions about abstract objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. I say “might” because people like Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor, sometimes suggest that finding meaning in one’s life is at least as important as meeting one’s more concrete needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Plus, by considering emotions with abstract objects, we may thereby deepen our understanding of abstract objects themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For defenses of such views, see, for instance, Döring (2014), Prinz (2004) and Tappolet (2012). See Behrendt (2010) and Deonna and Teroni (2012: chapter 6) for challenges to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Thanks to REDACTED for helpful discussion of this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)