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Abstract

Title: An Inquiry Into the Subjective Prerequisites of Awe

Over the last two decades, the experience of awe has received increasing attention in cognitive science and psychology, typically characterized within the framework of perceived vastness and the need for accommodation. One of the most robust empirical findings in this domain is the phenomenon of the "small self," diminished sense of individual self-importance and increased perception of being part of something larger. Despite its prominence, this concept remains philosophically underdetermined with respect to what kind of "self" undergoes this experience. Philosophers and psychologists don't specify whether the experience presupposes a complex, conceptual structure of identity, or if it concerns a more fundamental sense of presence.

This project aims to resolve this ambiguity by investigating the subjective prerequisites of awe. Specifically, I address the question: Does the experience of awe necessarily require a narrative self, or can it arise at the level of prereflective subjectivity? The research question rests on a broadly construed distinction between two models of selfhood: the narrative self and prereflective self-consciousness. The narrative self is a diachronic, conceptually structured construction of personal identity, reliant on autobiographical memory and semantic capacities. In contrast, the prereflective self refers to the immediate, embodied, and non-conceptual sense of "for-me-ness", inherent in the experiential field.

This presentation explores the plausibility of the prereflective account as a viable explanatory framework. I examine theoretical and empirical premises suggesting that the core phenomenon of awe may operate below the level of narrative integration. These premises include neurobiological evidence linking self-loss to the inhibition of regions responsible for self-modeling, as well as phenomenological and folk psychological distinctions between the analytical, discursive nature of wonder and the receptive, non-conceptual nature of awe. The narrative likely plays an important role in how awe is interpreted and integrated; however, preliminary findings of this project suggest that awe itself may be accessible without ongoing self-narration.