VALUES IN ACTION (VIA) CLASSIFICATION OF STRENGTHS

Chapter 3.21. Awe/Responsiveness to Beauty and Excellence

Initial draft by Jonathan Haidt & Dacher Keltner
(Aug. 3, 2001)


[Note: The edited book is intended to be a classification of strengths and virtues, just as DSM is a classification of illnesses. This chapter describes one of the 22 strengths or virtues that the book discusses.
For more on this project, see: http://psych.upenn.edu/seligman/taxonomy.htm ]

Case Study: An Exemplar of Awe/Responsiveness to Beauty and Excellence

A superb exemplar of awe and responsiveness to beauty and excellence is the poet Walt Whitman. William James (1902/1961, p.82) cited Whitman as his own exemplar of “healthy-mindedness,” and his description makes it clear that Whitman took great pleasure in both the sights and the people that surrounded him. According to a description of Whitman written by Dr. R. M. Bucke (cited by James on p. 82), Whitman’s favorite activity was to stroll outdoors by himself, admiring trees, flowers, the sky, and the shifting light of day, and listening to birds, crickets, and other natural sounds.
   It was evident that these things gave him a pleasure far beyond what they give to ordinary people. Until I knew the man, it had not occurred to me that any one could derive so much absolute happiness from these things as he did…. Perhaps, indeed, no man who ever lived liked so many things and disliked so few as Walt Whitman. All natural objects seemed to have a charm for him. All sights and sounds seemed to please him. He appeared to like (and I believe he did like) all the men, women, and children he saw… (R.M. Bucke: Cosmic Consciousness, pp. 182-186, abridged.)

Consensual Definition

\[
\text{Awe/Responsiveness to Beauty and Excellence refers to the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds. A person high on this strength frequently feels awe and related emotions (including admiration, wonder, and elevation) while, for example, walking in the woods or in a city, while reading novels or newspapers, while learning about people’s lives or while watching sports or movies. A person low on this strength goes about daily life as if wearing blinders to that which is beautiful and moving, taking little pleasure in the scenes that pass by, and in the strengths, talents, virtues, and accomplishments of others. We presume that people whose minds and hearts are open to beauty and excellence find more joy in daily life, more ways to find meaning in their own lives, and more ways to connect deeply with other people. The evidence we review below, although very preliminary, is consistent with these claims.}
\]
We posit that there are three principle types of goodness for which it is beneficial to be responsive: (i) physical beauty (primarily the beauty of the visual environment, but also auditory beauty such as music); (ii) skill or talent (displays of virtuosity or “superhuman” ability by other people), and (iii) virtue or moral goodness (displays of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, or many of the other virtues in this manual). Each of these three kinds of goodness can produce awe-related emotions in observers (Keltner, Campos, Shiota, Shin, & Haidt, 2001). In the strongest cases beauty produces awe, skill produces admiration, and virtue produces the emotion of moral elevation (Haidt, in press a). All three of these emotional reactions are related as members of the family of self-transcendent emotions, of which awe appears to be the central member (Keltner & Haidt, 2001).

There are currently several theories and measures of aesthetic sensitivity, but there appear to be no theories or measures about individual differences in emotional responsiveness to skills or virtues. In this essay we group the three kinds of responsiveness together, but empirical research will be needed to determine if these sensitivities do in fact cluster together in individuals. Even if they do not it may still make conceptual sense to group them together. There may be multiple channels by which people can connect to excellence around themselves and create enriched and awe-filled lives. Broadening the scope of stimuli beyond classical conceptions of beauty and the arts has the added benefit of making this strength less a product of education, class, and political ideology, and more accessible to people who have had little exposure to poetry and art museums, and little encouragement to develop an aesthetic attitude towards works of “high culture.”

Because of the almost complete lack of empirical research on individual differences in responsiveness to non-aesthetic excellence, this chapter will take the following form. Empirical findings will be given when available about responsiveness to beauty, but almost all statements about responsiveness to other kinds of goodness will be pure speculation. The later sections of this chapter are therefore quite short. It is our hope that future editions of this manual will be able to fill in the many holes that we identify in this review.

Awe/RBE (Responsiveness to Beauty and Excellence) should be compared to the psychological trait “openness to experience” (McCrae, 1996) and to the everyday term “aesthetic sensitivity.” Awe/RBE is narrower than openness to experience (which includes elements of sensation seeking and intellectual broad-mindedness), but broader than the subscale of openness labeled “openness to aesthetics.” Openness to aesthetics is similar to the everyday term “aesthetic sensitivity,” both of which can be used to describe individuals who seek out and revel in poetry, painting, and other arts. We assume in this essay that awe/RBE correlates highly and overlaps heavily with openness to aesthetics, but we think of it as differing in two ways: (a) it is broader in that awe/RBE includes responsiveness to non-aesthetic forms of excellence such as might be demonstrated by athletes, jugglers, and saints, and (b) awe/RBE refers to more than just the degree of pleasure afforded by the contemplation of beauty and excellence. We think of awe/RBE as a specific emotional responsiveness, the tendency to experience at least subtle self-transcendent emotions such as awe, admiration, and elevation, triggered by the frequent perception of beauty and excellence in one’s surroundings.

Awe/RBE is probably related to several other strengths in this classification, especially curiosity/love of learning (since high awe/RBE people are likely to seek out new ideas and
experiences that can trigger awe), gratitude (since gratitude involves being emotionally moved by the moral excellence of another person’s generosity), and spirituality (since spiritual people are likely to experience frequent and powerful awe).

One way to think about awe/RBE is as the opposite of schadenfreude (joy in another’s failure or misfortune). We might even coin the term tugendfreude (joy in another’s virtue) to refer to the taking of pleasure in the skills, virtues, and successes of others. Awe/RBE might then be thought of as encompassing both aesthetic sensitivity and tugendfreude.

The behavioral manifestations of awe/RBE are subtle, for awe, wonder, and responses to beauty and excellence often involve passive receptivity and stillness, as opposed to other emotions which often are marked by clear action tendencies (Frijda, 1986). Awe/RBE is likely to be associated with certain expressive markers, such as wide open eyes and open mouth (Darwin, 1872/1965), physiological symptoms such as piloerection (goosebumps), tears, and the proverbial lump in the throat, and certain delayed actions that are motivated by a desire to improve the self and the greater good (Keltner et al., 2001).

Theoretical and Research Traditions Germane to Awe/RBE

The human tendency to feel powerful self-transcendent emotions has been studied since ancient times in two contexts: aesthetics and religion. In both of these traditions theorists focused primarily on the characteristics of objects that produced awe, rather than on characteristics (traits) of observers, but several ideas are still helpful for understanding awe/RBE. In more modern times awe/RBE has been discussed in some form by humanistic psychologists and by emotion researchers.

A) Aesthetics

As the ancient Greeks refined their skills in sculpture, architecture, drama, and music, their philosophers began to ask what makes a work excellent, and why people respond so strongly to excellent art. Plato had mixed feelings about the arts, since they so often portrayed bad behavior that he feared would lead the young astray. But others saw in art an important pathway for moral and spiritual advancement. One of the most important ancient treatises on the emotional response to the arts was written by the Greek Longinus in the 1st Century A.D., entitled “On the Sublime.” Longinus sought to understand the power of good writing and oratory to move people emotionally and fill them with awe:

> The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer.... Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt. (Longinus I:4).

Longinus addressed the issue of individual differences among audience members by describing the sort of person who is not open to the sublime. He quoted a passage from Plato’s republic in which Socrates distinguished among those who pursue higher (intellectual) versus lower
(corporeal) pleasures. This 2300 year old passage can still serve as a description of a person low on awe/RBE:

Those... who have no experience of wisdom and goodness, and do nothing but have a good time, spend their life straying between the bottom and middle in our illustration, and never rise higher to see or reach the true top, nor achieve any real fulfillment or sure and unadulterated pleasure. They bend over their tables, like sheep with heads bent over their pasture and eyes on the ground, they stuff themselves and copulate, and in their greed for more they kick and butt each other with hooves and horns of steel.... [Republic Book IX, 586a]

Plato’s and Longinus’ concern to distinguish higher from lower pleasures raises the question for us as to whether all forms of excellence are equally important. Is it as much a strength to be emotionally responsive to beauty in a sexual object as in a landscape? Is it as good to be emotionally responsive to a baseball game as to a symphony?

A second important treatise on aesthetic responsiveness was written by Plotinus (205-270 A.D.), the founder of Neoplatonism. Plotinus argued that the soul finds joy in contemplating beauty, for it sees in works of art a hint of the divinity that it (the soul) shares. Plotinus linked together all the forms of excellence that this chapter is concerned with, suggesting that people go through a developmental progression in their ability to respond to excellence. People begin with the contemplation of sensuous beauty and then move on to delight in beautiful deeds, in moral beauty, and in the beauty of institutions, getting ever closer to the more abstract platonic form of beauty (Beardsley, 1967).

In 18th and 19th century Europe philosophers took the interest in aesthetic responsiveness, or the sublime, in a new direction. Struck by the aesthetic power of landscapes, mountains, and other natural objects, theorists and artists alike advanced more secular ideas about beauty and awe, shifting the focus from divine to material causes of awe. The most focused analysis was that of the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1757/1990). Burke’s goal was to explain the experience of the sublime, the feeling of expanded thought and greatness of mind that is produced by literature, poetry, painting, and viewing landscapes (a fascination of his day, Phillips, 1990). Burke reasoned that two properties or themes endow stimuli with the capacity to produce the sublime experience: power and obscurity. But Burke had little to say about individual differences in receptivity to the sublime.

More modern treatments of aesthetics also focused on the qualities of an object that make it beautiful (e.g., variety within unity), independent of any features of the observer (e.g., Bell, 1913, Berlyne, 1971). However an important idea common to many modern approaches, and going back to the 18th century, is that an aesthetic attitude is “disinterested,” that is, one contemplates an object or listens to music without concern for its utility, or for how it furthers one’s goals (Burke, 1757/1990; Fry, 1920; Shaftesbury, 1714/1977). This idea can help resolve the question raised above, about higher versus lower pleasures. If awe/RBE is a strength because it enables self-transcendence (and its associated loss of ego, and openness to others) then the “higher” forms of excellence are those that lead to self-transcendence. A person admiring a perfect body in a pornographic magazine is not disinterested, while a person admiring a landscape is (unless she is a real estate developer). A person who is emotionally responsive to a triple-play in baseball because of an intense desire to beat the other team is not disinterested, but
a person who is equally thrilled to see a great play by either team has a disinterested love of baseball that may enable self-transcendent awe or admiration.

Whatever the elicitors of aesthetic pleasure, the history of aesthetics suggests that one of the keys to understanding awe/RBE is to understand that works of art and drama have the capacity to create a state of deep absorption, which is experienced as a kind of self-transcendent journey into another world. This idea of self-transcendence is at the heart of an ancient Hindu theory of aesthetics contained in the Natyashastra, an 11th century elaboration of a much older treatise on drama (Shweder & Haidt, 2000). The key idea of the Natyashastra is that the presentation of emotions on stage, or in a poem, elicits in the most sensitive members of the audience an emotional state that is parallel to the emotion portrayed, without being the emotion portrayed. An actor weeping on stage elicits in the viewer not real sadness, but a meta-emotion (rasa) of sadness, in which observers can taste or savor an emotional experience that floods through them, taking them away from their everyday world of goals, fears, and petty concerns. Because the goal of much Eastern religious practice is precisely the forgetting of ones concerns and attachments, this state of aesthetic rapture is recognized to be a valuable spiritual state, akin to other forms of mystical experience. Even in the West, loss-of-self may be an important emotional and cognitive response to art and drama. Greene and Brock (2000) have recently created a “Transportation Scale” to measure the degree to which individuals find themselves transported into the world of a narrative, and this scale should be useful in the study of awe/RBE. (See also Tellegen’s [1982] construct and measure of “absorption.”)

B) Religion

The importance of awe has been even more salient in the history of religion. Awe is the normal response to contact with divinity, appearing clearly in the holy scriptures of Judaism (e.g., God’s appearance on Mt. Sinai), Christianity (e.g., Paul’s conversion), Hinduism (e.g., Arjuna’s encounter with Krishna), and most other religions. In these classic cases, religious awe generally involves a mixture of fear and submissiveness with joy, ecstasy, and a malleability or openness to the teachings and commandments of the divine will. Awe seems to reprogram people, making them more pious and more prosocial, with little concern for material wealth, reputation, or other petty concerns of daily life (Keltner & Haidt, 2001).

Scholars of religion have long noted that awe is triggered not just by the presence of God, but by a variety of experiences that help one to transcend the self and become absorbed in something else. Otto Grundler (1922, cited in Wulff, 1997) discussed four classes of objects that often facilitate religious transcendence: 1) the world of nature, 2) inspired works of art that have a certain loftiness and grandeur, 3) historical and personal events that suggest an insight and will that is more than human, and 4) the testimony of people, particularly saintly people, who may themselves be thought to be divine. Many other scholars have noted the power of natural and artistic beauty to facilitate mystical states and religious devotion. However it is Grundler’s third and fourth classes that are most relevant for the present discussion, for they suggest that awe is not just a response to God or to visual beauty, but also to exemplary, exceptional, and virtuous people.
The preceding analyses could be taken to show that awe is the proper response to seeing any manifestation of God, God’s power, or God’s goodness, revealed in any aspect of creation, be it a landscape, a thunderstorm, a cathedral, or a virtuous person. However the reverse causal path is just as plausible: people have an innate tendency to be moved by beauty and excellence, and whenever these profound and ineffable feelings are triggered, people attribute the cause to the presence of God. This analysis would suggest that it is the very existence of the human capacity for awe/RBE that generates religions across human societies. Many of the accouterments of religion (music, architecture, ritual, stories about saints) can then be seen as attempts to amplify these feelings of awe/RBE.

Many scholars of religion have addressed the question of individual differences in liability to awe and religious experience, and two dimensions seem to emerge most frequently: rationality vs. intuition/emotion, and optimism vs. pessimism. William James (1902/1961) contrasted “existential judgments,” which are analytical statements about what a thing is, to “spiritual judgments” which are addressed to a thing’s value. Throughout his Gifford Lectures on religion he tried to inspire his highly rationalistic academic audience to go against their normal analytical habits and make spiritual/intuitive judgments. Many others have noted a correlation between emotional or intuitive modes of thought and spirituality or a liability to powerful religious experiences (Maslow, 1964; Otto, 1923; Schleiermacher, 1806/1967). If this correlation is real then people high on awe/RBE may be expected to score high on Epstein’s “faith in intuition” scale, and lower on “need for cognition” (Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996).

But perhaps the most famous trait distinction in the psychology of religion is William James’ (1902/1961) contrast of the “healthy minded” versus the “sick soul.” The healthy-minded are models of awe/RBE. They see everything in life as beautiful or good, they look out on the world with grateful admiration, and they are wide open to the world, because the world itself is a manifestation of divinity. Those with sick souls, in contrast, see evil and decay everywhere and view the world as an illusion whose temptations should be shunned. Divinity and salvation lie elsewhere so such people are not emotionally responsive to beauty and excellence in their worlds. James’ descriptions of these two types of people clearly overlap heavily with modern discussions of optimism and pessimism, suggesting that optimists should in general be higher on awe/RBE.

C) Humanistic Psychology

The idea that there is an innate and powerful emotional response to beauty and excellence was an important axiom of humanistic psychology. Carl Rogers (1961, cited in McCrae, 1996) thought that “openness” was the natural human condition, which often gets suppressed by acquired defenses. But it was Abraham Maslow who had the most to say about awe (as peak experience), and about individual differences in awe-proneness (depending on one’s location on the hierarchy of needs).

Maslow himself appears to have been extraordinarily high on awe/RBE. He was frequently and powerfully moved by music, art, nature, and even by reading scientific journals (Lowry, 1973). He had a deep appreciation for human virtue, and one of his major life projects was the search to find and understand “good human beings” (Maslow, 1970). In an earlier age Maslow’s
awe/RBE might have made him devoutly religious, but as a psychologist in post-war America he chose instead to interpret his awe experiences as an important kind of psychological experience that is open to all people, whether religious or secular. Maslow (1964, pp. 59-68) listed 25 aspects of these “peak experiences.” A few of these aspects relevant to awe/RBE are as follows: 4) perception is relatively ego-transcending, self-forgetful, unselfish; more object centered than ego-centered. 8) The world is seen as beautiful, good, desirable, and worthwhile, even as evil and suffering are recognized and accepted as part of the world. 11) Cognition is much more passive, receptive, and humble. People are more ready to listen and much more able to hear. 12) Emotions such as wonder, awe, reverence, humility, surrender, and even worship before the greatness of the experience are reported. 20) People become more loving and more accepting. Note that each of these aspects of a peak experience has already been discussed above as an aspect of an aesthetic or religious experience.

Maslow’s research suggested to him that there were large individual differences in the degree to which people were open to peak experiences. He even went so far as to label the “two religions of mankind” to be the “peakers” and the “non-peakers.” That is, within any religion or any culture one finds individuals who “have private, personal, transcendent, core-religious experiences easily and often and who accept them and make use of them, and, on the other hand, those who never had them or who repress or suppress them and who, therefore, cannot make use of them for their personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfillment” (1964, p. 29). One personality factor said to correlate with being a non-peaker (low on awe/RBE) is a highly rationalist/materialist approach to understanding life. Maslow has harsh words for the psychologists of his day “whose ratio of knowledge to mystery must be the smallest of all the scientists” (1964, p.46).

A second individual difference that correlates with being a peaker is one’s location on Maslow’s (1970) well-known hierarchy of needs. The lower four levels of the hierarchy (physiological, safety, belongingness, and esteem needs) involve motivations to overcome deficiencies. But if a person is both fortunate enough and wise enough to have satisfied or transcended these needs he or she reaches the highest stage of self-actualization, where cognition changes from D-cognition (overcoming deficits) to B-cognition (a more receptive and holistic mode of thinking about Being). It is interesting to note that the penultimate level of the hierarchy is about esteem needs, which could make a person competitive or envious when faced with excellence or success in others. It therefore stands to reason that a person who is personally secure, who is no longer concerned with esteem needs, should be more able to take joy and pleasure in the skills, talents, and virtues of others (tugendfruede).

D) Emotion Research

Emotion researchers have had an abiding interest in how people respond emotionally to objects of beauty, most notably in the visual arts (Oatley, 2001) and music (Juslin & Gabrielson, 2001). Other emotion researchers have asked whether there is a specific emotion related to the perception of beauty. Darwin (1872/1965) considered astonishment, a close relative of awe and a potential response to beauty, but he largely focused on how terror can produce astonishment (for example, when native Australians first encountered Europeans). More recent emotion theorists have suggested that there is indeed a distinct awe-like state, with a unique expression,
physiology, and experience (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Lazarus, 1991). The most substantive observations on this state were made by Frijda (1986), who discussed the sense of wonder. He noted that the sense of wonder is defined by the action tendency to be open and to passively receive stimuli in the environment.

More recently, Keltner and Haidt (2001) have offered a theoretical account of awe and related states such as admiration and elevation. They take a prototype approach to the family of awe-related states, positing that two features are central to awe: the perceived vastness of the stimulus, and some difficulty accommodating the stimulus into the individual’s knowledge structures. They further reason that awe evolved as an adaptive response to leaders in social hierarchies (e.g., awe towards charismatic leaders, as discussed by Durkheim and Weber), and has generalized to other events and objects that are vast and difficult to accommodate, such as human actions (extraordinarily skillful or noble deeds), art (e.g., cathedrals), and nature.

Emotion researchers have not, however, created any measures of individual differences in the experience of awe or related states. In fact, widely used measures of positive experience, such as the PANAS (Watson, Tellegen, & Clark, 1983), make no mention of any state even remotely related to awe. Promising measures are on the horizon, however. McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (in press) have created a 6 item measure of individual differences in the frequency and intensity of the experience of gratitude, which is one kind of responsiveness to moral beauty. Based on recent evidence suggesting that there are many highly differentiated positive emotions, Shiota and Keltner (2001) are developing an individual difference measure of the tendency to experience different positive states. One of these states is awe, and in the scale they assess the tendency to respond to beauty, to see pattern and design, to feel interconnected with others, and to frequently experience awe.

Perhaps the most relevant scale is one being developed by Walling and Keltner on individual differences in epiphany. Their interest is in the sudden feeling of insight people have during otherwise ordinary experiences. Much like the ability to feel awe and be responsive to beauty and excellence, epiphanies are associated with elevated perceptions of pattern, design, interconnectedness, and new relations between previously separated objects. Their scale assesses the frequency of these epiphanic themes across several domains, including art, nature, spirituality, interpersonal interactions, politics, and self-reflection.

Existing Individual Difference Measures

There is at present no self-report measure of individual differences on awe/RBE. The closest currently measurable construct is the “Big 5” trait “openness to experience” (for a history of this
trait and related constructs, see McCrae, 1996). This trait is defined by interests in ideas, fantasy, and aesthetics, having unconventional values, and the predilection to excitable feelings and actions motivated by broad interests and curiosities (Costa & McCrae, 1992). But only one subscale of openness to experience seems truly relevant for the measurement of Awe/RBE: Openness to aesthetics. High scorers on openness to aesthetics are described as “[appreciating] art and poetry; they may or may not have talent and good taste, but they use art to expand their knowledge. They are likely to be described as inventive and idealistic. Low scorers are relatively insensitive to and uninterested in art” (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The subscale includes questions such as: “I am sometimes completely absorbed in music I am listening to.” “Watching ballet or modern dance bores me.” “I am intrigued by the patterns I find in art and nature.” “Sometimes when I am reading poetry or looking at a work of art, I feel a chill or wave of excitement.” The subscale focuses on interest, fascination, and enjoyment of the arts, with only a single question about nature, and none about human excellence or virtue.

There are also two existing scales that measure susceptibility to or frequency of self-transcendent experience. The Cloninger Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI) has 7 main components, one of which is “Self-Transcendence.” High scorers on this scale sound a lot like Maslow’s self-actualizing peakers. They are described as “wise and patient; creative and self-forgetful; united with the universe,” while low scorers are described as “impatient; unimaginative and self-conscious; proud and lacking humility.” Some sample items are: “Often when I am concentrating on something, I lose awareness of the passage of time.” “Often I have unexpected flashes of insight or understanding while relaxing.” “Sometimes I have felt as if I was part of something with no limits or boundaries in time or space.”

Piedmont (1999) developed a “Spiritual Transcendence Scale” that he claims represents a sixth factor, beyond the five factors of the NEO. Piedmont defines Spiritual Transcendence as “the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place to view life from a larger, more objective perspective” (p.988). Sample questions from this scale are: “I feel that on a higher level all of us share a common bond.” “I have been able to step outside of my ambitions and failures, pain and joy, to experience a larger sense of fulfillment.” “When in prayer or meditation, I have become oblivious to the events of this world.” Because one third of the questions concern prayer and meditation, this scale is less useful than the Cloninger scale for work in a non-religious population.

Moving beyond self-report measures, the field gets even thinner. There used to be many tests and measures of aesthetic sensitivity used by art schools and art teachers, but most of these fared poorly when subjected to psychometric examination or construct validation (Eysenck, 1988). One test that has garnered some empirical support is Eysenck’s Visual Aesthetic Sensitivity Test (VAST), in which participants are given dozens of pairs of similar figures and asked to select the one that is “better” and “more harmonious.” A person’s score on the test is the percentage of times he or she selects the figure that was created by an artist, and validated by other artists, as being the most harmonious (see review in Eysenck, 1988).

A bolder and less conventional measure was devised by researchers in the 1970's who sought to understand individual differences in responses to psychedelic drugs. Houston and Masters (1972) created a device called the “Audio-Visual Environment.” The AVE was essentially a
sound and light show projected onto an eight foot semicircular rear-projection screen, designed
to completely fill up the subject’s visual and auditory fields with beautiful images and rhythmic
sounds for 30-45 minutes. It was then possible to measure individual differences in the degree to
which subjects experienced relaxation, euphoria, distortions in perceptions of space and time,
and even trance states. An approach such as this could be used to measure at least the beauty
component in responsiveness to beauty and excellence.

A Face-Valid Self-report Questionnaire

The most basic empirical question that must be answered about Awe/RBE is whether emotional
responsiveness to various kinds of beauty and excellence do in fact co-occur in the same people.
A self-report questionnaire should therefore specify the various potential sub-types of beauty and
excellence, and then offer several potential items within each sub-type. A first pass at such a
scale is as follows:

A) Beauty

1) Art and Architecture
   I often feel a craving or hunger to see great art, or go to art museums [modified
   from VIA 213]
   I often stop and stare when I enter the lobby of a particularly grand or beautiful
   building.

2) Drama and Dance
   I have often been left speechless by the beauty depicted in a movie. [VIA 137]
   If a friend took me to watch a modern dance performance, I would probably be
   bored.

3) Fiction, and Poetry
   Sometimes when I am reading a really good book or a poem, I feel a chill or a
   rush of excitement.

4) Music
   I sometimes feel moved almost to tears by the beauty of music I am listening to.

5) Nature (over-weigh this category – it is as important as the previous 4 combined)
   In the last week, I have watched a sunrise or sunset with appreciation. [VIA 237]
   I am always aware of the natural beauty in the environment. [VIA 157]
   I sometimes get strong urges to go out in the woods, or to “commune with nature”
   I don’t understand how people can sit and stare at a waterfall for hours.

6) General aesthetics
   It is important to me that I live in a world of beauty. [VIA 16]
   I experience deep emotions when I see beautiful things. [VIA 53]
   I see beauty that other people pass by without noticing. [VIA 92]
   I have created something of beauty in the last year. [VIA 220]
B) Skill and Talent (admiration)

In the last month, I have been thrilled by watching an excellent performance in sports. [modified from VIA 45]

In the last month, I have met at least three people I consider to be brilliant.

When I see a really rich person, I sometimes think he or she doesn’t deserve to be so rich. [reverse, schadenfreude]

When someone beats me in a competition, I often feel admiration for their his or her skill.

I usually find that everyone has at least one amazing talent.

C) Virtue (elevation)

The goodness of other people often brings tears to my eyes. [VIA 47]

When I see someone do something really nice for someone else, I sometimes feel a little twinge of guilt. (reverse)

When I see someone do something really nice for a stranger, I get a warm, pleasant feeling in my chest.

In addition it might be useful to measure the following traits:

D) Self-Transcendence (Take items from Cloninger, or from Piedmont)

E) Absorption (Take items from Tellegen, 1982)

**Known or Suspected Correlates of Awe/RBE**

The lack of a scale assessing individual differences in awe/RBE puts us on very speculative grounds when thinking about the likely correlates of awe/RBE. However examining patterns of correlations with some related constructs allows us to predict that awe/RBE should be correlated with the following:

*Openness to Experience.* Part of openness to experience is openness to aesthetics (McCrae, 1996). Walling and Keltner found in a sample of 100 participants that their measure of epiphany correlated with a measure of the openness to experience r = .41. This correlation suggests a strong relationship to openness to experience, but it also suggests that awe/RBE and openness are not the same construct.

*Extraversion.* We would expect awe/RBE to correlate modestly with Extraversion, given that this trait consistently correlates with the disposition to experience positive emotion (e.g., Watson & Clark, 1992).

*Agreeableness.* The Big 5 trait of agreeableness correlates with several scales that may be related to awe/RBE, including gratitude (McCullough et al., in press) and transcendence (Piedmont, 1999).

*Materialism* (negative correlation). Recent studies have documented negative correlations between materialism and gratitude (McCullough et al., in press), and between materialism and
epiphany (Walling & Keltner, 2001). A person whose appraisals of the world are focused on the advancement of his or her own material fortunes seems more like Plato’s portrayal of a greedy boor (above) than like Walt Whitman (below).

Politics. McCrae (1996) reviews several studies linking openness to experience to political liberalism (the relationship, not surprisingly, is consistently positive). Liberals are also more likely to support the arts and to value the environment. This finding may, however, reflect a slight bias in the items used on the openness scale, which focus more on “highbrow” sources of aesthetic experience (e.g. poetry).

Gender. Women score higher on the “connectedness” subscale of Piedmont’s (1999) self-transcendence scale, and on Greene & Brock’s (2000) measure of transportation. Also Haidt and Algoe (unpublished) found that women were much more prone to elevation – they were more easily moved by displays of virtuous actions.

Known or Suspected Outcomes of being High on Awe/RBE

The evidence relating Awe/RBE to life outcomes is almost non-existent. What little indirect evidence there is points to a potential paradox. On the one hand, empirical studies of the experience of awe and responses to beauty and excellence (e.g., Haidt, in press a; Keltner et al., 2001) point to clear ways in which proneness to awe/RBE should have positive life outcomes. People consistently report that experiences of awe and elevation have profound outcomes, motivating self-improvement, personal change, altruistic intentions and actions, and the devotion to others and the larger community. Given these findings, one would expect that proneness to awe/RBE to correlate with a variety of prosocial outcomes, such as relationship commitment, altruism, warmth and connection felt towards others, enhanced social relationships, and greater meaning and purpose in life. Once Awe/RBE scales are available, researchers will be in a position to pursue these ideas.

Yet researchers may be in for a surprise. Openness to experience, the construct closest to Awe/RBE, has yet to relate to many life outcomes. Thus, measures of openness to experience do not significantly relate to job performance, relationship satisfaction, or personal well-being. We suspect that more specific measures of Awe/RBE, and more well honed measures of theoretically relevant life outcomes (e.g., commitment to community as opposed to relationship satisfaction) will help uncover benefits of awe/RBE. Since awe/RBE is a more affectively based construct than is openness to experience, we believe that people high on awe/RBE are likely to reap the many benefits associated with positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2000).

How Awe/RBE Develops Across the Lifespan

The developmental course of awe/RBE is entirely unknown. Like most personality traits, awe/RBE is likely to have a substantial heritable component. In fact, openness to experience appears to be the most heritable of the Big 5 traits (Loehlin, 1992). But even if variance in awe/RBE was mostly explained by genes, it would still be of interest to map out its developmental emergence. The literature on religious development and religious conversion may be relevant here: it appears that the emotional component of religious life becomes much more
complex and powerful in adolescence, compared to childhood. Studies of religious conversions and epiphanies repeatedly show that such experiences are most common among adolescents and young adults (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985). It makes sense that adolescence and young adulthood should be times of maximal awe/RBE, for these are times when young people are forming their own identities and values. An active search for excellence in potential role models, and a heightened receptivity and malleability of the self, would be much more effective ways to grow than, for example, simply copying one’s own parents.

Cross-National and Cross-Cultural Aspects of Awe/RBE

It seems clear that every human culture has standards of beauty and excellence, and that every human culture wants its children to internalize and live up to these standards. Awe/RBE should therefore be a strength in all cultures. It is, however, a major empirical challenge to establish the degree to which these standards, and the most important domains of excellence, vary across cultures. There is at present a growing body of work on cultural variation in moral intuitions, virtues, and values (Haidt, in press b; Schwartz & Bilskey, 1990; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997). This work suggests that there are large cultural differences in the importance placed on particular virtues (e.g., chastity and respect for authority in hierarchical cultures, versus self-expression and autonomy in individualist cultures), but there are relatively few cases of reversals (i.e., a virtue in one culture is considered a vice in another). The general argument made in the present manual – that there is a list of approximately 22 universal virtues – may well be true, as long as it is acknowledged that the relative ranking of these virtues across cultures may vary dramatically.

Interventions that May Foster Awe/RBE

Beauty and excellence can be found everywhere -- in nature, in the actions of ordinary people, on television, and in school textbooks. In this sense Awe/RBE should be a profoundly democratic virtue, accessible to all. Furthermore, even if awe/RBE is partially determined by genetic heredity, it seems likely that each person has a range of possible responsiveness levels, and it should be possible to design interventions that move people towards the top of their ranges. Many such programs already exist: there are nature based programs (e.g., outward bound), art based programs, admiration based programs (role models; Big Sister/Big Brother), and various programs that encourage epiphanic experience (e.g., religious retreats). We would expect these sorts of programs to foster awe/RBE. As the empirical measurement of awe/RBE advances we will be able to ascertain whether this is true or not.

One intervention particularly germane to our discussion of awe/RBE is the work of Kuo and colleagues on the outcomes related to being exposed to green spaces in inner city settings (Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, & Brunson, 1998). These colleagues and others (e.g., Kweon, Sullivan, & Wiley, 1998) have found that exposure to green outdoor spaces, developed in barren inner city settings, enhances neighborhood social ties and the individual’s sense of community. These findings fit squarely with our analysis in that experience with nature facilitates connections in the community, and offers hope for other like minded interventions.
References Cited in this Chapter


