

Experiencing awe increases belief in the supernatural

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Awe-inspiring moments—like the sight of the Grand Canyon or the Aurora Borealis—might increase our tendency to believe in God and the supernatural, according to new research.

The new findings—published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science—suggest that awe-inspiring sights increase our motivation to make sense of the world around us, and may underlie a trigger of belief in the supernatural.

"Many historical accounts of religious epiphanies and revelations seem to involve the experience of being awe-struck by the beauty, strength or size of a divine being, and these experiences change the way people understand and think about the world", says psychological scientist Piercarlo Valdesolo of Claremont McKenna College.

"We wanted to test the exact opposite prediction: It's not that the presence of the supernatural elicits awe, it's that awe elicits the perception of the presence of the supernatural."

Valdesolo and his colleague Jesse Graham of the University of Southern California tested this prediction by having participants watch awe-inspiring scenes from BBC's Planet Earth documentary series or neutral video clips from a news interview. Afterward, the participants were asked how much awe they felt while watching the video, and whether they believed that worldly events unfold according to some god's or other non-human entity's plan.

Overall, participants who had watched the awe-inspiring video tended to believe more in supernatural control, and were more likely to believe in God when compared with the news-watching group. This effect held even when awe-inspiring but impossible scenes, such as a massive waterfall through city streets, were presented.

Another study showed that participants who watched the awe-inspiring clips became increasingly intolerant of uncertainty. This particular mindset—a discomfort with uncertainty—may explain why feelings of awe produce a greater belief in the supernatural.

"The irony in this is that gazing upon things that we know to be formed by natural causes, such as the jaw-dropping expanse of the Grand Canyon, pushes us to explain them as the product of supernatural causes," Valdesolo notes.

But the researchers point out that these data could also shed light on why certain individuals seek to explain the world through secular and scientific means: The experience of awe may simply motivate us to search for explanations, no matter what kinds of explanations they are.

This might be why, in another experiment, participants who watched the awe-inspiring video showed greater discomfort and were more likely to believe a random string of numbers was designed by a human hand.

Based on these preliminary findings, Valdesolo and Graham are now looking at factors that modulate the effect of awe on belief in the supernatural.

For example, they are testing whether adopting submissive body postures, which make us feel less powerful, might dispose us to experiences of awe. Such a link could perhaps explain the presence of such postures in religious practice, such as kneeling, bowing, and gazing

up.

"The more submissive we act, the more awe we might feel, and perhaps the stronger our beliefs become," says Valdesolo.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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