# To Matter or Not to Matter

**by Theodore Dalrymple**

**Few of us who live in modern countries** can see the stars at night, or more than a few at most. This is because of light pollution, the production of artificial light at night that is not strictly necessary (though what is not strictly necessary is probably itself incapable of strict definition—what is unnecessary for you is necessary for me). A recent article has suggested that 80 percent of Americans and 60 percent of Europeans never see the stars.

I am fortunate: On fine nights at my house in France, which is in an unpopulated area, the Milky Way is easily visible. When I look up at the sky on such a night, I am slightly ashamed of

my ignorance of astronomy; I am awestruck in a completely ignorant way.

Apart from awe, I feel a certain unease when I look at such a sky, not to say terror. I know that the light from those stars has taken years to reach us, and that light travels at 186,000 miles per second (I used to know how the speed of light was first measured, but I have long since forgotten). The distances and the sizes are beyond imagination, or at any rate beyond *my* imagination. The thought of all that vastness at a temperature of absolute zero freezes my blood. How tiny we are, how insignificant! A single bacterium is more to us than are we to the universe!

Of course, I tell myself that importance and significance are not natural qualities, and that if we are the only self-conscious beings in the universe, then it is we and we alone who can confer importance and its opposite, unimportance, on anything that exists. But this argument, while logical enough, strikes me as whistling in the wind, or rather in the void; it reminds me of Epicurus' reflection on the irrationality of the fear of death, "If I am, then death is not; if death is, then I am not." No doubt that is all very true, but I have not observed that it has liberated many from the fear of death. What liberates men from that fear is either a transcendent cause, often a bad one, or a life so horrible that death seems preferable. We are much less affected by purely logical considerations than we, the supposedly rational animal, would like to suppose.

The thought of our own insignificance when we look up at the stars is potentially a dangerous one, though I do not go so far as to say that it has actually been responsible in practice for any of the great crimes of mankind; for if we are totally insignificant, what does anything really matter? If nothing really matters, what does it matter how I behave? And if it does not matter how I behave, then I might as well do whatever I can to achieve my ends, to take maximum pleasure

from my fleeting existence. If that involves harm to others, so be it; after all, nothing matters and everything will be the same in the end, indeed very soon by comparison with the age of the universe. Eat, drink, and rob and steal, then, for tomorrow I die.

Wrongdoers often turn philosopher as soon as they are accused of having done wrong. Their philosophizing is always *post facto*, but they may nevertheless by instinct have mastered rhetorical devices. For example, if accused of theft, they will immediately ask for what they have never asked for before, namely a defense or justification of the system of private property, so unequal in the distribution of its largesse. Since the person thus apostrophized has probably never considered the question himself, he suddenly finds himself at a disadvantage, in an awkward spot. He can only stutter an answer, which makes him look unsure of himself. Thus, the wrongdoer secures a rhetorical victory.

Anyhow, the fact, or supposed fact, that nothing matters is an excellent and reassuring excuse for those who would behave badly to secure an advantage to themselves. Looking up at the stars, then, if they were visible, might conduce to the spread of amoralism.

On the other hand, not being able to look up at the stars, thereby being made aware of how tiny we are, might conduce to self-importance and small-mindedness. Our own affairs then grow in significance and occupy the totality of our minds. We lose the habit, and therefore the ability, to judge the size of our concerns with anything else. We have no sense of the order of things, especially if, at the same time, we do not study history; and minor inconveniences then become for us tragedies of the first magnitude. Thus, we become egotistical, self-obsessed, ill-tempered, self-absorbed, and trivial-minded.

As is so often the case, we need a happy medium, or rather the

ability to hold two opposite things in our mind at the same time: We are everything and nothing. We are the only beings in the universe (so far as we know) who, or that, can assign importance or significance to anything; but at the same time, we are very small.

I suppose this is one of the benefits of religion, that it manages to juggle these two opposites into some kind of coherent whole. We are, of course, nothing by comparison with infinite magnitude and glory of God; yet we are of special and unique significance to that being infinitely greater than we, who has created us in His image. Hamlet expresses this perfectly:

> *What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! How infinite in capacity! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust!*

The paragon of animals, the quintessence of dust: What a perfect summary of our existential situation!

And yet, for all its perfection as an understanding, Hamlet, as we all know, ended badly, as did all those who surrounded him. Man could be defined as the creature who is capable of making the worst of anything! In Russia, they say, all roads lead to disaster—but not only in Russia, perhaps.

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