

# FIRST THINGS

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## THE SCALE OF THE UNIVERSE AND THE RELIGIOUS VIEW

*by Hugh Hunter*

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Who is the protagonist of *Hamlet*? It seems pretty obvious that it is the dark prince himself, but I am sure you can imagine a clever reader making a case that it is really Ophelia, or Claudius, or some other important character. What would you say to someone who said that the protagonist was actually Cornelius, the Danish envoy to Norway, whose one line is shared with someone else?

It would be hard to know where to begin with such a profound misunderstanding of *Hamlet*. But if the argument from scale is successful, an argument which Nicholas Everitt develops in his book, *The Non-Existence of God*, religious people who believe that mankind is the (or even, a) focal point of a caring creator are making a similar mistake.

The argument from scale is aimed at a religious person who believes that to God, we human beings are, to use Everitt's catchall term, the "jewel" of creation. Or to follow the literary metaphor, Everitt's target thinks that mankind is the protagonist in this universal drama. The problem is that our best science reveals that we collectively play the role of Cornelius, arriving on the scene in a fraction of the last million of the universe's billions of years, and occupying one bit of one solar system of one galaxy among trillions of others.

Anyone can see that if Shakespeare had intended to make Cornelius the main character of *Hamlet*, he would have given him a bigger and more important role to play. The fact that he did not do this tells us something about Shakespeare, namely that he did not regard the character Cornelius as the "jewel" of *Hamlet*. Everitt's reasoning transfers the same observation to the case of God. If God regarded us as jewels, as protagonists, he would have given us more time and more room on life's stage. But it seems obvious that God did not do this. Everitt concludes that God does not regard mankind as jewels or as protagonists, and theists who believe that God is the sort of being who does regard them that way are

mistaken.

Everitt's argument is open to a number of replies. One might argue that religious representations of God are such as to be characterized by discrepancies of scale. Christianity presents God both as lover, with the Church as his beloved, and as king, with the Church as his subject. Love and dominion are both characterized by acts on a grand scale, and it is hard to see why divine love and divine dominion should not be characterized by cosmic grandeur. I am not going to follow these lines of reasoning, though, because while they might address Everitt's argument, they would not come to grips with the problem of scale itself.

Even for those without religious commitments, the scale of the universe poses a problem. That is because each of us is inclined to see himself as the jewel, or protagonist at least of his own life, and even when the lessons of childhood force us to revise downward our estimation of our own significance, we remain committed to the importance of our projects and aspirations. But when we consider these projects against the scale of the universe, they suddenly appear insignificant.

Thomas Nagel argues that the human capacity to regard ourselves simultaneously from within and from the detached point of view is the source of our sense that our lives are absurd, and the attendant feeling of despair. As Nagel wrote in his 1971 article, "The Absurd," "men have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand . . . and the view is at once sobering and comical." The fact of scale offers this dispiriting view of his own life to anyone who cares to take it.

We might call the mistake at the heart of Everitt and Nagel's thinking the aviator's fallacy. From his airplane, the aviator looks down and sees that people look like ants. He might mistakenly conclude that people really are like ants, rather than whatever he had previously supposed people are like. But this would be a fallacy unless he could also show that the view from the cockpit is the true view. The wise aviator recognizes this, and avoids the fallacy by understanding that human beings, who are not actually ant-like, may appear ant-like when viewed from an airplane.

How then should the wise aviator regard other human beings? The religious view offers an answer. God regards us not only from outside, but also from within, as an author considers his characters' inner motivations and circumstances at the same time. Religious people suppose that not only prayer and miracles, but even the ordinary working of natural laws wrap the sensible world around the thinking agents who are its protagonists, just as all of *Hamlet*, from the politics to the weather, is wrapped around a few flawed Danish courtiers. Those willing to take on this view encounter no problem of scale.

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