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Deeper Cosmic Significance

A reflection on what it means to be human in a vast universe

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A recent article by Spencer Klavan, "All the Small Things: Epicureanism Then and Now", argues that either the universe is shot-through with meaning or nothing has any meaning at all. He examines a classical challenge to cosmic meaning—both ancient and modern—recounting how Epicurus denied divine providence, portraying the universe as governed by chance and indifferent to human affairs. This vision, Klavan argues, reappears in modern scientific materialism—such as Stephen Hawking's reduction of human life to "chemical scum"—and undergirds cultural phenomena like "cosmic insignificance therapy".

While these approaches seek comfort in detachment, Klavan warns that such comfort is brittle: if nothing matters at the grand scale, then ultimately nothing matters at all. In response, he calls for a recovery of meaning in which even the smallest things are significant—not as subjective projections, but as genuine features of reality. Crucially, Klavan's argument (not only in this article, but in his 2024 book, *Light of the Mind, Light of the World*, as well) leans not on formal metaphysics but on an **intuition**, a **felt sense** that the cosmos is *not* absurd. He appeals to the reader's experiential awareness that life is more than randomness or

indifference—a poetic, almost pre-rational recognition that the universe, in its beauty and intelligibility, means something:[1]

> Despite what we may profess to the contrary, most of us are moved by a powerful intuition that meaning does exist, at the level of the individual human life. The moral consequences of trying to suppress or explain away this basic intuition are exactly as monstrous and absurd as the physical consequences of trying to do a science experiment while doubting that valid observation is possible. If phrases like "moral worth" have any meaningful content at all then they must be built into the fabric of existence, not just coded as expedient fictions into our evolutionary programming. If so, then it starts to seem eerily possible that our sense of right and wrong is in fact reflective, however distantly, of a logos that governs the whole universe.

This intuition, for Klavan, is not to be dismissed but should be embraced as the beginning—though *only* the beginning—of wisdom.[2]

We will have to question the validity of this intuition. Nevertheless, as Klavan rightly notes, it stands as a common presupposition afflicting nearly if not every modern mind—despite this apparent intuitive sense of the meaningful—that our lives are cosmically insignificant. We cannot escape this **background cosmological nihilism**, for, even if we do not believe it ourselves, it permeates the minds and language and actions of others. The overwhelming scale of the universe, the indifference of natural forces, the fragility of life, and the erosion of traditional frameworks of meaning all contribute to this malaise. Against this backdrop, it often seems absurd to speak of purpose or order independent of human imposition. We drift in a sea of data and distraction, suspecting that

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[1] Klavan 2025: "All the Small Things: Epicureanism, Then and Now".

[2] "Similarly if life has worth and meaning, it has these not only once there is enough of it or once it endures for a certain length of time, or because we invented them to suit our immediate circumstances, but because worth and meaning are basic features of the universe that we see in it as surely as we see starlight. And if justice is present at some real structural level in the world outside of us, then what we are dealing with is a world that not only contains impersonal mathematical truths as features of its landscape, but also things like absolute good and evil. These by their very nature entail consciousness, will, and a quite fiercely active form of intelligence. Just about the only place we can locate things like math and morals is at a point of deep contact between human consciousness and the total architecture of the universe. A point of contact, that is, between the mind of man and the universal mind."

everything meaningful might be mere projection. But this disorientation is not compelled by the facts themselves; rather, the bleakness of our image stems from deficiencies in our habit of intellectual vision.

This vision, or lack thereof, is exemplified in this nihilistic background image of the cosmos: a tacit but pervasive imagination that pictures the universe as cold, vast, and directionless; as governed by chance, not order; as populated by a mere congeries of accidents in diverse configurations and not by things with essences or natures. Many contemporary cultural narratives presume this image, and this image seeps into our vision of everything, from suffering and death to love, beauty, and knowledge. Within this picture, the world seems not so much hostile to humanity as aloof to our very existence: a stage without a playwright, where everyone is actor and audience at once, operating without direction.

To cope with this bleak presupposed background, many in recent years have turned to the wisdom of antiquity in search of guides for living. We see not only the misnamed hedonistic "Epicureanism" of materialistic and sexual excess—the shallowest appropriation—but so too an "experiential" Epicureanism, which blends maxims about moderate enjoyment with the permission to have and seek out meaningful "experiences". So too, there are retrievals of Stoicism, Gnosticism, Platonism, and Cynicism. But often, as Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn shows well in her book *Ars Vitae*,[3] these retrievals are nothing but just another modern form of therapy dressed up in ancient garb: efforts at filtering cosmic dissatisfaction through a purportedly philosophical mesh, in hopes of obtaining a cleaner, less-disturbing attitude towards life.

But we need neither succumb to the contemporary despair nor practice such futile and fruitless self-deception. Instead, I am suggesting, we may see things better by taking a *genuine* philosophical turn by rediscovering the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas. The thought of St. Thomas—unlike the therapeutic appropriations of ancient philosophy—does not provide us an *escape* from contemporary nihilism.

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[3] 2020: *Ars Vitae: The Fate of Inwardness and the Return of the Ancient Arts of Living*. Lasch-Quinn gives an exhaustive survey of the literary, pseudo-philosophical, and pop-culture appropriations of these ancient theories by modern and contemporary seekers (and grifters).

Rather, it retrieves and revives our natural capacity for intellectual vision, a capacity that has been buried beneath the purported darkness of the seemingly empty and uncaring cosmos. Restoring Aquinas' cosmological vision of the universe—a universe structured by the principles of act and potency, essence and existence, form and finality—is not a desperate act of romantic defiance against modern science and the bleak picture painted by its irreligious interpreters, but the cleansing of a **necessary** hermeneutic lens for seeing the significance of those genuine discoveries which science has made. Put otherwise, St. Thomas does not offer us a "new narrative" but rather a way of recovering what we might call "metaphysical sanity" or "cosmological order": a humble subordination of the self to the sources of meaning, natural and divine alike, from which flow not only the *possibility* but even the *necessity* of an irreducible significance in each and every being of the universe. Put succinctly, the Thomistic vision sees in things an innate ordering to which chance and randomness are but subservient parts of the purposive whole.[4]

The skeptic or "rationalist" (or "freethinker") might recoil at this suggestion that the meaning of anything entails a meaning of everything—and that the meaning of everything suggests a divine source for the cosmos. But part of the brilliance St. Thomas reveals is the *inevitability* of meaning, even as experienced in strictly *natural* realities.[5] That is, the benighted modern imagination sees in causality only

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[4] That is, while Thomas' cosmological *image* may have been one structured by the Porphyrian crystalline spheres in which the planets and stars were embedded, his *vision* sees *through* this image, as only one possible explanation, *to* the principles—which principles endure today, as well.

[5] Cf. Thomas Aquinas 1259/65: *Summa conta Gentiles*, lib.2, c.30, n.7: "Therefore it must be known that, if the universe of created things is considered insofar as those created things are from the first principle, then they are found to depend upon His will [and] not from a necessity of their principle, except from a suppositional necessity, as was said. But if they are compared to their proximate principles, they are found to have an absolute necessity. For nothing prohibits some principles being produced not from necessity, but which, when posited, some effect follows of necessity: as the death of this animal is absolutely necessary on account of the fact that it is composed from contraries, although it was not absolutely necessary that it be so-composed from contraries. Similarly, that such things of nature were produced by God, was by His volition; but, given the fact that they are thus constituted, [we can say] something provenates or comes into existence which has absolute necessity." – "Sciendum est itaque quod, si rerum creatarum

blind force—or, worse, understands by "causality" only an explanation we provide ourselves, but which does not really reflect the world as it is. In other words, the modern conception of "causation" (which word they prefer) signifies only an *explanation*—and *not* the reality of the world itself.

By contrast, St. Thomas sees in the relations between cause and effect a **real** and **governing** order.[6] This governance is revealed in the pre-modern conception of

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universitas consideretur prout sunt a primo principio, inveniuntur dependere ex voluntate, non ex necessitate principii, nisi necessitate suppositionis, sicut dictum est. Si vero comparentur ad principia proxima, inveniuntur necessitatem habere absolutam. Nihil enim prohibet aliqua principia non ex necessitate produci, quibus tamen positis, de necessitate sequitur talis effectus: sicut mors animalis huius absolutam necessitatem habet propter hoc quod iam ex contrariis est compositum, quamvis ipsum ex contrariis componi non fuisset necessarium absolute. Similiter autem quod tales rerum naturae a Deo producerentur, voluntarium fuit: quod autem, eis sic statius, aliquid proveniat vel existat, absolutam necessitatem habet."

[6] Aquinas 1259/65: *SCG*, lib.2, c.24, n.5: "Those things which exist from the will, are either things to be done—such as the acts pertaining to virtue, which are the perfections of operations—or they are things which go out into exterior matter, which are called things to be made. And thus it is clear that things created by God are as things made. The governing rationale of things to be made is art, as the Philosopher says. Therefore all things created are compared to God as artifacts are compared to the artificer. But the artificer leads forth his artifacts into existence through the order of his wisdom and understand. Therefore, God likewise brings forth all creatures through the order of His understanding." – "Ea quae sunt a voluntate, vel sunt agibilia, sicut actus virtutum, qui sunt perfectiones operantis: vel transeunt in exteriorem materiam, quae factibiles dicuntur. Et sic patet quod res creatae sunt a Deo sicut factae. Factibilium autem ratio est ars, sicut philosophus dicit. Comparantur igitur omnes res creatae ad Deum sicut artificiata ad artificem. Sed artifex per ordinem suae sapientiae et intellectus artificiata in esse producit. Ergo et Deus omnes creaturas per ordinem sui intellectus fecit." See also Aquinas 1273: *Expositio Symbolum Apostolorum*, c.1: "He who believes all things to provenate from chance does not believe God to exist. But none are found to be so foolish, who do not believe that natural things are governed, and provided for, and disposed by God, since they proceed according to a certain order and within a certain time. For we see the sun, the moon, the stars, and all natural things to have a determined course, which would not occur if they were caused by chance; thus, if there is someone who does not believe in God, he would be foolish, according to what is said in the Psalms: "The fool said in his heart: there is no God" – "Qui autem quod omnia a casu proveniant credit, hic non credit Deum esse. Nullus autem invenitur adeo stultus qui non crederet quod res naturales gubernentur et provideantur et disponantur a Deo, cum in quodam ordine et certis temporibus procedant. Videmus enim solem, lunam, stellas et res omnes naturales determinatum cursum habere, quod non contingeret si a casu essent; unde si aliquis esset qui non crederet Deum esse, stultus esset secundum illud

final causes—as ends toward which things are directed, not merely through the choices made by intentional agents, but as fitting principles of resolution for entities *by nature*. Remove finality as a *real cause*, and you sever the relation between nature and intelligibility; "*what is*" ceases to be fully meaningful, for it becomes open-ended—everything becomes "what could be", with the "could" stemming from our own minds rather than from things themselves.[7] The world becomes describable but not meaningful, functional but not purposive; perhaps even enjoyable under the anesthetics of modern therapeutic forms, but nevertheless it will ultimately prove dissatisfactory to an intellectual being. By contrast, if all things are ordered to ends, and those ends to the good—if those ends *participate* in *the good*—then the cosmos is not a meaningless flux but a dynamic, hierarchical whole. However, if the good is not really present in things by their own natures but only our own choices—if the "meaning" of things is not from their being ordained to a good somehow independent of our choosing—then this determination of what is "good", too, ultimately falls back into a void of the meaningless, a void of inescapable human caprice and conflict. When confronted with the specter of nihilism, appeals to our intuitions of meaning cannot save us. Though we may *feel* the universe is meaningful, unless we can demonstrate and explain *why* this being or that experience means what we say it does, we will slip towards that void.

As such, much contemporary anxiety follows not merely from the unquestioned background image of a purposeless universe but also from the belief that we lack the vision to perceive meaning. Epicureanism, in its classical form, offers one alternative: if we deny that the gods care about us and retreat from public concerns, we will be able to seek a tranquil life. Contrary to the caricature that treats Epicureanism as merely seeking pleasure, there is a certain sobriety in the teachings of Epicurus. Klavan's approach to the cosmos—our feeling that little

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Ps. 'Dixit insipiens in corde suo: Non est Deus' etc." Cf. Oliva Blanchette 1992: *Perfection of the Universe according to Thomas Aquinas*, 308-09.

[7] In the words of Charles Sanders Peirce (1902: "A Detailed Classification of the Sciences" in *Collected Papers*, vol.1, §220): "Efficient causation without final causation, however, is worse than helpless, by far; it is mere chaos; and chaos is not even so much as chaos, without final causation; it is blank nothing."

things do, indeed, matter, thereby indicating that the big things do as well—takes a similar path. That is, the Epicurean says: the universe may be cold and hard at large, but you may enjoy these pleasures in a way that makes life, as a whole, to be good. Klavan says: you may not see purposes structuring the universe at large, but you can feel purpose and harmony here and now in these things before you—and you can rest, therefore, in the *sense* that there *is* a purpose in things, a purpose not dependent upon *you*.

But as responses to cosmic insignificance, both these perspectives ultimately collapse into a kind of resignation. They tell us not to ask questions about the meaning of the universe, not to inquire into the *what* and the *why* by which reality is governed. Epicureanism tells us "to enjoy the little things"; Klavan tells us to trust our intuition. St. Thomas, by contrast, demands that we look more closely and more deeply at the *why* behind the world that we uncover through natural reasoning and scientific inquiry alike. He does not ask us to provide ourselves a comforting narrative but to grasp the truth about our place in a greater order. To do this, we must sharpen our vision of the cosmos. We must not relapse into anesthetics of mere pleasure or the comfort of unquestioned intuitions before the unknown or that which is difficult-to-discover and the hard-to-understand.

Indeed, the grandeur and complexity of the universe revealed by modern science need not diminish us or our sense of purpose. On the contrary, it can and ought to awaken a deep **humility**—realizing the splendor and diversity of a sprawling cosmos that reflects an incomprehensible range of being, the overwhelming majority of which will remain forever unknown to us in all but the most minimal of signs. But the fact that we are not, contrary to the cosmological images of antiquity, physically central does not mean, contrary to the background cosmological image of today, that we are condemned to being metaphysically peripheral. Neither location nor size determine the worth of a being, but rather the manner in which that being possesses **existence**. To be capable of union with *the truth*; to have the capacity for *inquiry into being*; to **suffer**, to **love**—not only *despite* the enormity of the universe but even *because of it*[8]—these are not statistical

[8] 1259/65: *SCG*, lib.2, c.45, n.9: "Therefore, there is diversity and inequality in created things not by chance, not from the diversity of matter, and not on account of the intervention of some

anomalies of accidental collisions of atoms but signs of our participation in an existential order far greater than we can fully comprehend.

The recovery of this vision requires formation—not merely an appeal to feelings of intuition. Such feelings may prompt us to undertake the arduous road of inquiry, but they of themselves do not constitute **understanding**. One can *feel* that the universe and his own place within it are full of meaning—and yet behave completely contrary to the reality that is the source of meaning itself, namely, the governing order outside of which those realities have no meaning at all.[9] Seeing rightly is not a matter of collecting data nor of feeling harmonious resonance, but of cultivating the intellectual habits by which data are understood, by which we see through what is present to our senses so as to discern what *is* in itself, and thus to order ourselves in accord with it. Retrieving a proper cosmological vision, therefore, means rejecting both the presumption that we invent meaning and the despair that there is none to find. Aquinas teaches that meaning is not imposed but discovered; not created by the will nor merely resonant in feelings but unveiled and received through the laborious pursuits of the intellect. The meaning of things is not hidden in some other world of transcendental spiritual insight but radiates from the very being of things as they are here and now, right before us—provided we know how to see and how to question.

Suffering, too, finds a place in this vision—not as a contradiction of order but as a consequence of being finite. Created being is limited being. To be limited is to be capable of defect—to have faults and failings, especially in our material constitution; corporeal things are always subject to destruction and detriment, to being dissolved or becoming diseased. Yet even these defects are not without

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secondary causes, nor of merits; but from the proper intention of God willing to give the perfection to creatures such as is possible for them to have." – "Est igitur diversitas et inaequalitas in rebus creatis non a casu; non ex materiae diversitatae; non propter interventum aliquarum causarum, vel meritorum; sed ex propria Dei intentione perfectionem creaturae dare volentis qualem possibile erat eam habere."

[9] Put otherwise, there is a relation between the *intelligible meanings* of things—both as things themselves and as relative to everything else, as parts of the whole universe—and the *purposive ordering* of not only those things but also ourselves towards them. Cf. Kemple 2019: *The Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology*, 19-20 and Kemple 2022: *Introduction to Philosophical Principles*, 136-38 for more on the meaning of "meaning".

purpose. The imperfections of nature, that is, are not signs of cosmic failure—nor are they things to be perversely celebrated—but the inevitable cost of a created order in which finite goods exist in relation to one another. That we can recognize them truly as defects itself signifies our attunement to the good.

In this context, confronting our apparent cosmic insignificance is revealed to be a false problem. It presupposes a hollow metaphysics, with goodness placed on the scales of quantitative measurement. But the significance of a being comes neither from measurement nor from any feeling of meaningfulness, but from the reality of the being itself—a reality discovered only through careful inquiry.

Against the background of a fragmented and distracted world—one myopically and unquestioningly fixated upon the modern background image of cosmological nihilism—recovery of this vision allows us to perceive the world with clarity and to dispel the haze of therapeutic anesthetics (including a soothing facile "intuition" of the world as meaningful). Attaining such a vision will not answer every question or satisfy every doubt, but rather it will teach us how to ask these questions and resolve these doubts in the right way. This vision brings us into a life that is neither purely passive nor autonomously willful, but actively receptive, deeply contemplative, and teleologically governed.[10] The problem of insignificance dissolves not by inflation of the ego, nor by retreat into private pleasure, nor in attending to the minutiae of the here and now, but by acknowledgment of a cosmic order in which our place—though quantitatively small—is real, intelligible, and good, even as it demands of us that we continue to *question after meaning*.

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[10] Blanchette 1992: *Perfection of the Universe*, 15: "Human being stands at the pinnacle of nature, and from that vantage point it is the principle of order in nature, inasmuch as all inferior bodies are ordered to it; and it can, by its own initiative, introduce a new dimension of order. But the human being is still only a part of the universe, and as such it is itself ordered, along with the other parts (though in its own peculiar way, as we shall see), to the good of the universe as a whole."