



# Importance, Value, and Causal Impact

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## Abstract

Many believe that because we are so small, we must be utterly insignificant on the cosmic scale. But whether this is so depends on what it takes to be important. On one view, what matters for importance is the difference to value that something makes. On this view, what determines our cosmic importance is not our size, but what else of value is out there. But a rival view also seems plausible: that importance requires sufficient causal impact on the relevant scale; since we have no such impact on the grand scale, that would entail our cosmic insignificance. I argue that despite appearances, causal impact is neither necessary nor sufficient for importance. All that matters is impact on value. Since parts can have non-causal impact on the value of the wholes that contain them, this means that we might have great impact on the grandest scale without ever leaving our little planet.

## Keywords

causal impact – importance – significance – value – universe

Samuel Beckett once said that “[s]ince Galileo made the earth into a speck of dust in a vast universe ... we are condemned to live in a world of desolation.”<sup>1</sup> Another apostle of human insignificance, if a lesser writer, was H. P. Lovecraft who, in typical purple prose, described us humans as “the miserable denizens of a wretched little flyspeck on the back door of a microscopic universe.”<sup>2</sup> Such remarks are common, and many take it as a given that the vastness of

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<sup>1</sup> Buttner, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Lovecraft, 1918.

the universe described by modern science reveals that humanity, and our individual lives, are utterly unimportant on the cosmic scale – even if most of us quickly forget this crushing sense of insignificance.

Many philosophers agree that our minute size, compared to the vast universe that surrounds us, renders us cosmically insignificant. For example, Susan Wolf writes that many

take the fundamental lesson to be learned from the contemplation of our place in the universe to be that we are cosmically insignificant.... In the absence of a God ... it appears that we can only be significant to each other, to beings, that is, as pathetically small as ourselves. We want to be important, but we cannot be important...<sup>3</sup>

This conclusion Wolf accepts: these pessimist philosophers, she says, “are right about the futility of trying to make ourselves important.” We have no choice but to come to terms with what she describes as “the fact of our insignificance”;<sup>4</sup> the desire to be important is “unsatisfiable.”<sup>5</sup> And David Benatar agrees that “Earthly life is ... without significance, import or purpose beyond our planet.”<sup>6</sup>

But there is also an opposing view. Responding to the suggestion that the idea of cosmic significance makes no sense, Peter Singer comments that “[i]n the unlikely event that the Earth is the only place in the universe where sentient beings ever exist, then our judgment of how well the universe has gone should depend entirely on how well the existence of sentient beings on Earth has gone.”<sup>7</sup> And Derek Parfit ends his *On What Matters* with the remark that “[i]f there are no rational beings elsewhere, it may depend on us and our successors whether it will all be worth it, because the existence of the Universe will have been on the whole good.”<sup>8</sup> It certainly sounds as if Singer and Parfit think that if we are alone in the universe, we might actually be of *great* cosmic significance. This is a conclusion that I have defended in past work.<sup>9</sup>

This can sound odd: how can we be cosmically important without having an impact on the cosmos – without, as Wolf puts it, making “a big and lasting

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Benatar, 2018, 36. Benatar insists, however, that our lives are still significant on more restricted scales.

<sup>7</sup> Singer, 2009, 97–98.

<sup>8</sup> Parfit, 2011, 620.

<sup>9</sup> Kahane, 2014.

splash"?<sup>10</sup> Benatar and Hughes criticize my argument along these lines.<sup>11</sup> To possess importance on a given scale, they say, we must have a significant causal impact on how things go at that scale. Since we obviously have no such grand impact, genuine cosmic importance is out of reach.

I will argue that we do not need to have a great causal impact on the cosmic scale to be cosmically important. Causal impact seems critical to importance because, on more familiar smaller scales, it is often a condition for importance. But causal impact is not necessary for importance. We could be cosmically important without setting foot outside the Earth. While my aim here is to defend these grand claims about cosmic significance, my argument also sheds light on broader questions about the nature of importance and its relation to causal impact.

### The Value Impact Account of Importance

Before we can answer grand questions about our cosmic importance, we need to clarify what it means to describe something as important in more mundane contexts. To pick just some random examples, the things we attribute importance to include physical exercise, a revealing slip of the tongue, Hitler, and the Enlightenment. What these things have in common is that they make a difference – and things are more important the greater the difference they make. Now there are many ways to make a difference, and many of these are trivial.<sup>12</sup> The kind of difference making that endows things with genuine importance is, I suggest, *difference to value*.

On what I call

**The Value Impact View.** The degree to which something is important, relative to a domain, is a function of how much difference it makes to overall intrinsic value in this domain, compared to other things in it; and the more difference to value something makes, in this way, the more attention and concern it merits.<sup>13</sup>

Let me unpack this. To begin with, importance is always relative to some domain. The revealing slip of the tongue that offended your potential

<sup>10</sup> Wolf, 2007. Nozick (1989) also assumes that importance requires great impact.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, 2017; Benatar, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> See Frankfurt, 1999, 93.

<sup>13</sup> My account here builds on the more informal remarks made in Kahane (2014).

client, and perhaps derailed your career, can be important relative to multiple domains: the sale, your career, your family's prospects, etc. But you would not be surprised that this seminal event (relative to these domains!) is not a news headline, or studied by future historians. Your slip of the tongue – or for that matter, your career and life more generally, is just unimportant in the context of those larger domains. Your slip of the tongue probably does make *some* difference to value on the larger scale, making, say, your country or even the world a tiny bit worse (or better). But that difference is negligible compared to the difference made by so many other things.

So importance is relative: something can be important relative to one domain but trivial relative to another. But as what I just said also brings out, importance is also a relational property. We cannot tell how important something is just by tracing its own contribution to value. We also need to place it in relation to the difference made by other things. Ben Jonson was important in the Elizabethan scene, and in English culture more generally. But we cannot determine how important Jonson was just by knowing the quality of his work, or even what wider impact he had, if we do not also know anything about, say, Shakespeare's work and impact. Or to make the point counterfactually, Jonson would have been far more important had Shakespeare died very young – *even* if we hold Jonson's wider influence fixed. In this way the notion of importance operates like that of gradable adjectives such as small, fast or expensive: whether something is important depends on what it is surrounded by, just as whether something is small depends on the comparison class. I cannot say if a given object is small, even whether it is small *in the context of this room*, just by knowing its absolute dimensions; I also need to know the size of the other things in the room.

On the Value Impact View, to be important you need to make a difference to value. We can think of that difference in terms of how much value a given thing brings about in the actual world. Or we can think of it in counterfactual terms, in terms of how much value would have been lost or gained had the thing not existed (or the event not occurred, etc.). And the relevant kind of value is intrinsic value: the value that something possesses in itself, not derivatively or instrumentally;<sup>14</sup> and the difference in question is made to the overall amount of intrinsic value in a domain – the balance in it of good and bad. However, while what matters to importance is the difference something makes to overall intrinsic value, since important things typically contribute to that

14 As should be clear from this definition, I use 'intrinsic value' to refer to what Korsgaard (1983) calls 'final value'; the question of whether some things are valuable in themselves in virtue of their extrinsic properties is irrelevant to my argument here.

value through their effects, importance typically supervenes on *instrumental* (i.e. non-intrinsic) value. The death of Franz Ferdinand was, let us assume, bad in itself, but its historical importance is almost entirely due to the global upheaval it caused. We shall later see, however, that this need not always be so.

This account of importance leaves open several issues. In the simpler cases where the parts of the overall value of a domain can be neatly assigned to different contributors, we can think of importance as a fixed amount that is divided between each of the contributors, in proportion to the difference they make to the total. But most cases are not that simple, and multiple factors are causally responsible, to different degrees, and in more or less direct fashion, for a given difference in value. But we can ignore this complication as it does not affect the present argument.

The final element of the account is the normative upshot of being important. To be important is to merit being treated *as* important. And this, I say, is to deserve a degree of attention and concern that is proportional to one's importance – a great deal of attention if one is extremely important, and indifference and dismissal, if one is insignificant.

Importance is thus not, as sometimes assumed, synonymous with value.<sup>15</sup> It is a *function* of value but a rather different property.<sup>16</sup> Unlike importance, intrinsic value is not relative to a domain, or dependent on the value of other things in a domain. And we saw that importance, while a function of effect *on* intrinsic value, typically attaches to instrumental rather than intrinsic value. A slip of the tongue may have far less intrinsic value than a headache, but, via its effects, can be far more important.

I now turn to address an objection in the other direction: that importance need not have anything to do with value. After all, we can speak about studying as important for doing well in an exam, or about a cogwheel being important for the functioning of some clock. But describing these things as important is perfectly compatible with seeing neither the exam nor the clock as having (or leading to) any intrinsic value.

We do use the notion of importance in a wider range of contexts than directly captured by the Value Impact account. But that is not surprising since value terms such as good and bad also have such merely descriptive uses: things can have merely attributive goodness, such as being a good clock, or matter only as ways of achieving some given goal. But such value talk is either non-normative or has only conditional normativity. In much the same way,

15 Michael Smith (2006), for example, seems to identify importance with possessing value that is visible from an impersonal perspective.

16 Kahane (2011), 749–750.

something might be important, say, for counting blades of grass, but this gives us no reason whatsoever to pay it attention unless we already have the goal of counting grass. To be sure, even what affects intrinsic value does not immediately call for the attention of everyone. I can justifiably remain indifferent to, indeed ignorant of, events of immense importance in Moldovan history. But in virtue of their link to intrinsic value – these events might have led to decades of oppression, or transformed Moldovan poetry – they still possess an inherent normativity that is absent in merely descriptive importance.

Our lives are trivially important in numerous descriptive senses. But I believe that when people worry about the importance of their lives, they have in mind the normative sense I have been sketching, a sense that ties their lives to something that independently matters, that matters in a way that would be recognizable from a more impartial standpoint. And since our lives possess and influence intrinsic value, it is also obvious that our lives *are* important, in the normative sense, on *some* small enough scale. What people worry about is rather that their lives, or even humanity as a whole, are unimportant on some larger scale or frame of reference.

### Cosmic Significance

To speak about cosmic significance is, I suggest, just to speak of (normative) importance on the most expansive frame of reference: importance in relation to *everything* else out there, across all space and time. Our cosmic significance is thus the difference our existence makes in the grand scheme of things, when, literally, *all things are considered*. This is something we cannot know just by knowing the absolute value we possess or bring about, or by knowing what importance we possess relative to some arbitrarily narrower scale.

In the same way, what we can call our ultimate ‘largeness’ – how our absolute size compares with everything out there – tells us how we ultimately measure up. On the terrestrial scale, we are big compared to pencils and mice, small compared to elephants and skyscrapers. But it is still a shock to realize that the gigantic Earth (gigantic compared to things typically salient to us) is itself miniscule, to put it mildly, compared to the vastness revealed by astrophysics.

It is thus not surprising that people assume that the same follows for our importance on the cosmic scale. When we move up to a higher scale, the significance of things usually dramatically diminishes. We may expect the same to happen when we move from the terrestrial scale to the preposterously vaster cosmic one. Moreover, if importance is what merits attention, it is natural to use the following heuristic to determine a thing’s importance: would that thing

receive attention from someone considering things on the relevant scale? And it is also natural to think that we, being so tiny, would be invisible to someone adopting such a cosmic viewpoint. I later discuss another reason why people have this impression, one to do with our limited causal powers.

In past work I have argued, however, that this impression is mistaken – not because it is clear that we are cosmically important, but because our dimensions are irrelevant to this question. What will decide it – as Singer and Parfit also seem to suggest – is whether we are alone in the universe.

We can set out this argument as follows:

#### THE SOLITARY SIGNIFICANCE ARGUMENT

- (1) **The Value Impact View.** The degree to which something is important, relative to a domain, is a function of how much difference it makes to overall intrinsic value in the domain, compared to other things in the domain.<sup>17</sup>
- (2) How important something is on the cosmic scale is a function of how much of a difference it makes to the overall intrinsic value of the entire universe, compared to other things. [from 1]
- (3) If something is the only thing of intrinsic value in the cosmos, then the overall value of the universe *just is* the value of that thing, and that thing therefore makes a maximal difference to the overall value of the universe. Notice that (3) is true both in terms of the portion of overall value that would be attributable to that thing, and in counterfactual terms, on the assumption that if that thing had not existed, the universe would contain nothing of value.

The argument further assumes that

- (4) Terrestrial life has intrinsic value.

I mean this claim about terrestrial life as shorthand for all the value associated with sentient life on our planet, from the pains and pleasures of dormice to the horrors and triumphs of human history. Different axiologies will develop the details differently. For our purposes it is enough that nearly everyone accepts some version of (4) – even pessimists, who think that this value is negative.

<sup>17</sup> Notice that for the purposes of this argument, it is enough if the Value Impact View states a sufficient condition for importance. Thus, while I will go on to argue against several alternative accounts of importance, the Solitary Significance argument is compatible with a disjunctive view on which one or more of these accounts captures independent conditions that are also sufficient for importance.

It follows from 2, 3 and 4 that

- (5) If nothing outside the Earth has intrinsic value, then terrestrial life is important on the cosmic scale.

In fact, if we are alone in the universe,<sup>18</sup> then this has several further corollaries. First, terrestrial life would be the *only* cosmically important thing. Second, terrestrial life would be the *most* cosmically important thing. And third, terrestrial life would be *maximally* cosmically important – as cosmically important as anything *can* be.

The argument speaks of the value, and thus of the cosmic significance, of terrestrial life as a whole.<sup>19</sup> But with the added (and widely held assumption) that we humans, and the kinds of things we can do or bring about, are of far greater value than other terrestrial sentient beings, it also follows that we humans collectively possess the greatest cosmic significance.

Now the conclusion of the argument is a conditional. We do not know if its antecedent is true. But so long as it might be true then we might be of great cosmic significance. I think it is also almost certainly true that if we are not alone, and many other intelligent lifeforms exist, then we really lack any cosmic importance.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> My argument assumes here that if we are alone in the universe, then there is nothing of intrinsic value outside the Earth. This would just follow on the widely held assumption that sentience (or perhaps life more generally) is a necessary condition for intrinsic value. But the argument is compatible with thinking that, say, great works of art possess intrinsic value independently of being experienced by anyone; if we are the only intelligent beings in the universe, art is a purely terrestrial affair. Things would get more complicated if we also ascribed intrinsic value to, say, majestic canyons. But I have argued elsewhere that, coupled with plausible assumptions about the comparative value of natural aesthetic value and that of sentient and intelligent beings, even such an axiology would be compatible with the Solitary Significance Argument (though perhaps not with its title ...). For further discussion see Kahane (2014), 756–769.

<sup>19</sup> Benatar speculates that my argument is concerned with our *moral status* (Ibid., 49–50), and he agrees that there is a sense in which “our value could be significant in some distant corner of the universe,” such that other intelligent beings should not treat us in certain ways. But this, Benatar rightly says, is irrelevant to angst about cosmic insignificance. However, that is an odd interpretation of an argument which revolves around the idea that we would be cosmically significant only if other intelligent beings *do not* exist. The Value Impact View merely makes familiar assumptions about intrinsic value and the relation between the value of wholes/worlds and of their parts. There is a sense in which the overall value of a world is its value as seen from an impartial perspective. But even an amoralist can care about importance in this sense.

<sup>20</sup> Benatar argues that this line of argument has odd implications. The first is that “[e]ven if one thinks that humans may have more cosmic [significance] than toads can have, it is still the case, according to the argument, that if humans have immense cosmic meaning,



When Wolf writes that “[w]e want to be important, but we cannot be important” on the cosmic scale,<sup>21</sup> this can refer either to us as individuals or to us as a collective. When people worry about cosmic significance, they often have both in mind, and Benatar makes it clear that, on his view, we matter in neither sense “*sub specie aeternitatis*.”<sup>22</sup> The Solitary Significance Argument says that if we humans are alone in the universe, we are collectively of great cosmic significance. But we already know that we are not alone *qua* individuals – there are, after all, all these billions of other people around. So the Value Impact View also entails that, as individuals, we are unimportant, not only on the cosmic scale but even on much smaller ones.<sup>23</sup> This should not be surprising. Unless delusional, few of us think of ourselves as possessing world-historical significance. And if we’re not remotely candidates for importance on the terrestrial or even national scale, why expect to suddenly be important on the cosmic one? However, my argument does not rule out individual cosmic importance. I mentioned Hitler as an example of someone important, but so were the Buddha, Elizabeth I, and Mandela. These are all figures of great terrestrial importance – at least so far. If we are alone in the universe then it follows that they *also*

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toads also have impressive cosmic [significance].” (*Ibid.*, 50 I have replaced ‘meaning’ with ‘significance’). Benatar is right that the argument has this implication, but it is not clear why that is a problem. If there is no life anywhere else in the universe, then all terrestrial life is utterly unique, on the cosmic scale, and thus incredibly precious. When we think of toads against that background they do seem amazing. Imagine holding a toad in your hand, thinking: “There’s nothing remotely like that in the entire universe. Only right here, on seemingly unremarkable Earth, did such astonishingly complex beings evolve – beings that are sentient, and thus valuable. If all life on Earth goes extinct, there will be nothing of value *anywhere*.” Far from being absurd, this seems exactly right. Because we inhabit such an organically rich environment, we lose touch of that extraordinary fact. Another supposed odd implication relates to the way that on the Value Impact View the importance of something depends on what else of value surrounds it. Benatar thinks that because, unlike the universe around us, the Earth is teeming with life, it follows that “human life would have much less terrestrial significance than cosmic significance. (Human life would have less terrestrial significance because there are also aardvarks, elephants, llamas, and zebras, for example.) This is the exact opposite of what we usually think” (*Ibid.* 51). The argument does not have this implication. On Earth, our significance is qualified by the existence of many other sentient beings, even if we humans are more valuable, and therefore more significant. That is an implication of the account and is, I believe, correct. But when we turn to the cosmic scale, we need to consider *all* things of value and this would *still* include all those llamas and zebras. So we possess the *same* comparative importance, on that scale, not more. There is one difference: here we (and the toads too) can be said to be more important than *many more things*: all those planetary systems, black holes, etc.

21 Wolf, 2011.

22 *Ibid.*, 26.

23 Kahane, 2014, 762ff.

possess corresponding cosmic importance (conversely, these examples also suggest how we humans could still aspire to be collectively cosmically significant even if we are not alone.) Now, it is unlikely that anyone reading this has a real shot at world historical importance and thus, at least potentially, at individual cosmic importance. But it can still matter to us that we together might matter on the grandest scale. We can still make our much smaller contributions to the collective effort, and these contributions would have a different character if we are alone in the universe – our footnote to a footnote to Plato means more, for example, if humanity's fumbling philosophical reflections are not merely treading well-worn paths crossed long ago by thousands of other civilizations.

We often think about importance in terms of degree: things can be more or less important, and therefore also more or less important compared to other things. But we sometimes speak of importance in a categorical sense: when something is important *enough*, we can describe it simply as important, period. Thus, to describe something as *insignificant* is ambiguous. It can mean either that something has *zero* importance, or that it possesses far too little importance to count as categorically important. Very few people would be appropriately described as (categorically) important on, say, the national scale, let alone the world-historical one. But as I noted above, this does not mean that we possess zero importance. We do make a difference; it is just a comparatively tiny one.

When people worry about our cosmic significance, they sometimes worry that nothing humanity does is important, period, on the cosmic scale. As I have argued, if we are alone in the universe then we *would* collectively be *very* important and, therefore, straightforwardly also categorically important – and at least a few people might even be individually cosmically important; but it is very hard to see how humanity as we know it would count as important in this way if the universe is teeming with intelligent life. However, I suspect that many people also think that each of us, and humanity as a whole, possess *zero* importance when viewed on the cosmic scale. This is simply false on the Value Impact View, even in a densely populated universe. We would still make our little contribution, our small (comparative) difference to overall value. We will not be significant – particularly worthy of note – but neither would we be literally absolutely *insignificant*.<sup>24</sup>

24 I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this.

### Cosmic Significance and Causal Impact

Hughes and Benatar reject the Solitary Significance argument because they think that it fails to address the true source of angst about cosmic insignificance. What people worry about is that, because we are so small, we have no causal impact beyond the Earth. Hughes thinks that we are depressed by how small we are compared to the universe because “[r]ecognition of the tiny place we occupy in the Universe throws a stark light on our distinct lack of causal power.”<sup>25</sup> And Benatar writes that when people “notice how cosmically insignificant we are” what they notice is that

“[a]lthough we collectively can have some effect on our planet, we have no significant impact on the broader universe. Nothing we do on earth has any effect beyond it ...”<sup>26</sup>

According to the Solitary Significance Argument, we would be cosmically significant if we are alone in the universe. But since this will not change our causal impotence on the cosmic scale, Hughes and Benatar argue that this could not give us the kind of significance we crave.

We can begin by asking whether to have cosmic significance *just is* to have causal influence at the cosmic level. Call this the *Causal Impact View*. Hughes holds this view. On his diagnosis it is causal power alone that we crave at the cosmic scale. Hughes points out that there are contexts where we do describe things as significant in virtue of their causal impact – e.g., a body of moist warm air might be significant in the sequence of events that led to the formation of a hurricane. And he goes on to argue that, by contrast with the kind of importance I describe, increased causal powers at the cosmic level would remove our angst about our miniscule size:

“Suppose ... that we were to have control over the trajectory of distant stars, and the future of far-flung galaxies; that we could bend and warp the course of the Universe to fit our purposes, and so on. Would we still feel cosmically insignificant? I doubt it. Probably we would feel rather pleased with ourselves.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>27</sup> Hughes, 2017.

But this is not a good test of the Causal Impact View given that our ability to change the universe to *fit our purposes* would (or could) closely link these imagined causal powers to valuable, indeed massively valuable, outcomes. Our purposes are unlikely to involve shifting random dust clouds in some galaxy as opposed to, say, colonizing distant planets or creating majestic art on an astronomical scale.

We need scenarios where we have causal influence at the cosmic level but *without* making any difference to value. Imagine we invented a device that allowed us to change the orbits of numerous planets in faraway galaxies. Our causal reach would be vast. By assumption, controlling these planetary trajectories in this way would make no difference to value – it wouldn't make anything better or worse if we shift these planets in this or that direction; assume, for instance, that there is no life, and never could be life, on the affected planets.

Would this orbit turner address worries about our cosmic significance? This seems to me doubtful. To be sure, at first we might feel a sense of power. Puffing out our chests, we might think: 'Yes, we might be specks, but specks that can shape what happens in the furthest galaxies.' But a moment's reflection will dispel the illusion. Whatever we do here on Earth – all the things that matter to us – people's lives, and the suffering they contain, our greatest achievements, etc. – would still have no cosmic significance whatsoever. And the one way in which we would supposedly have cosmic significance would, by definition, be frivolous. After all, controlling planets like that has precisely the character of an insignificant choice: there is no reason whatsoever to move them in this rather than that direction. Perhaps there is still reason to move them in *some* direction? Well, would you really line up eagerly to get your turn at the orbit turner, expecting to finally be endowed with the craved-for cosmic significance? It might be amusing to fiddle with this extraordinary gadget. But it is the wrong kind of thing to endow humanity with missing gravitas. If Sisyphean rolling of one terrestrial rock up a hill is pointless, surely rolling billions of such rocks across the universe is just as pointless.

We need to distinguish two questions. One is whether, when people worry about cosmic significance, what they crave is causal power. The other is whether mere causal power is worth having. Hughes actually agrees that mere causal power is *not* worth having, or worrying about. As Hughes concedes, power only matters instrumentally – i.e. *via its effect on value*. And he comes close to agreeing that it is really important in the evaluative sense that matters.<sup>28</sup> However, I think that my discussion above suggests that mere causal

28 Hughes, 2017.

power is not even what people want. Why should they crave such an *unimportant* kind of importance?

Hughes replies that

“We tend to treat power as though it is intrinsically valuable. We seek it out and covet it, quite irrespective of how we might wield it and what it might get us. One need only look at the history of totalitarian politics to recognise this tendency in its most grotesque form.”<sup>29</sup>

But most people are not power hungry in this way, including many of those who worry about their cosmic insignificance. And such existential angst is a feeling that is easy enough to elicit in nearly anyone – it does not especially afflict those who lust for power; arguably the opposite is the case. More importantly, even the power hungry do not desire to move rocks around or change the spin of sub-particles; they want to control other people or to have elevated social status. Thus, while we may attribute causal importance to things in various descriptive contexts, the kind of importance people actually seek involves at least a potential link to value.

### Is Causal Influence Even Necessary for Importance?

When people want to be important, or least not totally unimportant, they do not want merely to make a causal difference. But the discussion so far suggests an alternative view: that people associate cosmic importance with having a causal impact on the cosmic level in a way that *does* make a difference to value. Such a view would basically combine the Causal Impact View and the Value Impact View. I therefore call it the Combined View.

Nozick seems to have held this view. He thought that something of value cannot be important if it does not have impact, but also that “[a]n important event ... is one with effects that matter, ones that make a large difference to (the amount or character) of value or meaning, or to some other evaluative dimension.”<sup>30</sup>

Benatar also seems to accept this view. He links significance to making a causal difference, and tells us that one way for a life to be significant is for it to make a mark. And when Benatar gives examples of lives that are terrestrially important, they are usually of lives that have made a great causal impact,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Nozick, 1989, 170–172.

including figures such as Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot.<sup>31</sup> Yet these people did not merely have a great neutral causal effect, but a horrifically negative one. Benatar also considers the view that we should focus only on lives that make a 'positive, worthy or valuable' impact, and he later writes about transcending one's limits 'in a valuable way.'<sup>32</sup> And unlike Hughes, Benatar clearly thinks that importance in this sense is well worth having – and that we are therefore right to feel depressed about our cosmic insignificance.

Since on the Combined View it is still the case that we cannot have cosmic significance without having causal impact on the cosmic scale, this view is still inconsistent with the Solitary Significance argument.

While I argue against the Combined View, I concede that it has initial plausibility. Paradigmatic examples of people, acts and events that we consider important on the terrestrial and smaller scales involve making a considerable difference to value *by* making a large and extensive causal difference. Think again of Hitler, the Buddha, or Mandela. Moreover, when people aspire to be important, or do something important, these are often their models. You do not become important, it seems, by cultivating your garden. You must go out and change the world.

However, there is something puzzling about the idea that extensive causal impact matters in this way. We said that causal power can have great instrumental significance: by having greater causal impact, we can typically bring about, and influence, more value. And often, we have a greater effect on value by having a causal impact that extends further in space and time. But that is compatible with the Value Impact View. Causal influence is a means to make *more* of a difference in value. And the spatial extent of one's causal influence matters only to the extent that the relevant space *contains more things of value one can influence*. But this often is not the case. The mayor of NYC is more important than the governor of Alaska.

The question is why, when one *does* make a certain difference to value, it should matter whether this effect on value is achieved via spatiotemporally extensive causal impact rather than a localized effect. Just as it is hard to see why size or distance matter in themselves, it is hard to see why it should matter whether the difference in value that something brings about is concentrated in a spectacular speck or achieved via an explosion spanning the entirety of universe.

<sup>31</sup> Benatar, 2018, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Benatar, 2018, 19.

### Benatar's Argument

So it is puzzling why we would need spatially extensive causal influence to be cosmically important. Some remarks of Benatar, however, suggest an argument that would explain why this might matter. Benatar writes,

"Many people who are concerned that life is meaningless ... notice how cosmically insignificant we are. Although we collectively can have some effect on our planet, we have no significant impact on the broader universe. Nothing we do on earth has any effect beyond it ... That is true of us as individuals, but in the grand sweep of planetary time, let alone cosmic time, it is also true of our species and all life.

Earthly life is thus without significance, import, or purpose beyond our planet ... Neither our species nor individual members of it matter *sub specie aeternitatis*."<sup>33</sup>

While Benatar acknowledges that meaning, import and purpose are not synonymous, he thinks that is irrelevant to the question of cosmic significance.<sup>34</sup> I disagree. When people wonder whether their lives are meaningful, they occasionally mean to ask whether their lives are important. But on many influential accounts of meaning, meaning and importance can easily come apart: many lives that are intuitively meaningful are not important in any interesting sense, and many important lives possess little or no meaning.<sup>35</sup> My argument is that we might be cosmically significant in the sense of being important at the cosmic level, and I explicitly deny that this entails that our lives possess cosmic meaning, or would cure us of all forms of existential angst.<sup>36</sup> And it seems to me that even if we were cosmically important on the Combined View – imagine being the leader of a sprawling intergalactic civilization – we could still wonder whether our lives are meaningful.

We can, however, set this aside, since Benatar explicitly asserts that the considerations quoted above show that our lives are "without ... import ... beyond our planet." In what follows, I focus only on the question of importance.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 17–18.

<sup>35</sup> I argue for this in Kahane (Forthcoming); see also Frankfurt (1999). Metz's (2013) criticism of consequentialist accounts of meaning also shows that importance is not necessary for meaningfulness.

<sup>36</sup> See Kahane, 2014, 765, fn. 17.



We can set out Benatar's argument as follows:

P. Nothing we do on Earth has any causal effect beyond it.

Therefore,

C1. We have no significant impact on the broader universe.

Therefore,

C2. Earthly life is without significance or import beyond our planet.

To be significant, then, is to have significant impact, where significant impact is understood in causal terms. We are cosmically insignificant because we do not have such causal impact on the 'broader universe.'

The claim could not be that we do not have any causal impact *on* the universe. We do, since we have causal impact here on Earth, and the Earth is part of the universe. Nor is it plausible that for something to be important in relation to a spatiotemporal region, it needs to have causal impact on each and every part of that region. Napoleon was not an insignificant figure in European history just because his campaigns did not impact some Finnish village. It would not help much, of course, to say that we need to have *significant* causal impact on the universe, since we are now precisely trying to figure out what is required for something to be significant. And although it might be tempting to unpack 'significant impact' as having a causal effect on most of something, this is not plausible either since, even on Benatar's view, we would presumably have the requisite causal impact if we could control the trajectory of all planets in the universe; yet such an impact would still affect only a fraction of the cosmos.

Benatar could rightly reply that he does not need to provide a positive account of what kind of causal impact we would need to have to count as cosmically significant. Whatever that is, it is clear that we do not have it since we cannot causally affect anything beyond the Earth.

Now, two qualifications need to be made to that last claim. First, via space probes like Voyager, or the radio signals we emit, we do have causal effects that extend beyond the solar system. But these are presumably too meager. Second, and more importantly, we cannot rule out that in the distant future we humans will be able to explore the Milky Way, and perhaps beyond. So Benatar must either assume that even such a future could not endow us with any cosmic significance, or his claim must be the weaker one that at present we have no cosmic significance but that it is nevertheless possible (if unlikely) that we will attain such significance in the future. That would be a major concession since our current actions can affect whether we could have such future impact, potentially endowing these acts with a degree of cosmic significance even on Benatar's terms.



But set this aside. According to the Solitary Significance argument, we could have great cosmic importance even if we *never* leave the confines of our planet. For this to be right, Benatar's inference must be mistaken. I argue that this inference trades on two ambiguities. The first relates to the claim about having no impact on the 'broader universe.' We are asking whether we have cosmic significance – significance from a perspective that considers the entire cosmos. 'Broader universe' can refer to such a contrast between cosmic significance and merely terrestrial significance. But Benatar seems to take 'broader universe' to refer to *other parts* of the universe. And it begs the question to assume that we cannot have an impact on the universe as a whole without having a causal effect on the rest of its parts. Now it seems right that if you are cosmically important, then you are important not just on Earth but also on, say, Alpha Centauri. But that is just to say that if there are (or were) intelligent beings on Alpha Centauri, you would deserve their attention if you were cosmically important. This in no way shows that you need to causally influence Alpha Centauri to deserve such attention.

We should turn to ask, then, what is required for something to make a difference to the universe as a whole. As a first pass, it seems plausible that for something to make a difference to something else, the former needs to make a difference to the properties of the latter. But it is actually very easy to affect some properties of the universe: because we exist, the universe has the property of containing *homo sapience*, and even the property of containing my sneeze. For obvious reasons, it does not help to say that to be important, one has to make a difference to the universe's *important* properties. Can we identify the universe's important properties with its *fundamental* properties? But if 'fundamental' just means important, this does not help while it is implausible that to be important one has to be *ontologically* fundamental (it is Napoleon who is historically important, not his sub-atomic components).

You might think that the relevant properties must be those that would be mentioned in a cosmological account of the universe and its history – just as a mark of something's terrestrial importance is that it deserves mention in a history of the world.<sup>37</sup> This might seem to support Benatar's argument. A complete cosmology should mention the laws of nature, the Big Bang, galaxy formation, and black holes, but why should it mention the denizens of a random planet orbiting a humdrum star? Well, as it happens, cosmologists are much troubled by the fact that the cosmos is such as to make possible, and contain, beings such as us who can adopt such a cosmological perspective. So by this criterion, we *are* cosmically important.

37 See Kahane (2014); Benatar (2018), 32.

It could be objected that an interest in this issue is just a projection of the concerns of terrestrial cosmologists onto a perspective from which such questions are not of any internal interest. But I do not see the basis for this assertion. Nor is the issue specifically terrestrial in focus: if there are further intelligent lifeforms in the universe, the question arises with respect to them with equal force. It could be replied that this would just broaden the concern to one shared by rational beings, without thereby becoming an issue of interest at the cosmic scale. But it is hard to see how one could draw a distinction between cosmic importance and what impartial rational beings considering the cosmos as a whole should find worthy of attention (it is not as if there is also the alternative perspective of *non*-rational things).

In any event, I do not particularly see the basis for identifying importance on the cosmic scale with what cosmologists pay, or ought to pay, attention to. Cosmology does, of course, consider things *on* the cosmic scale but that hardly endows it with automatic authority about what counts as *significant* on this scale.

I believe, however, that we do not need a non-circular account of what counts as a significant cosmic property to identify one set of properties that merit this epithet – the axiological properties of the universe.<sup>38</sup> These include:

whether the universe contains anything of value;  
 what, in consequence, is the overall value of the universe;  
 whether that value is overall positive or negative, and to what degree.

It is hard to see what could be a *more* important property of the universe than its value, or lack thereof. If there was (or is) a god, then these are the key (perhaps only) properties such a being would consider when deciding whether to create a given world. If the universe is overall bad, then it would have been better if it never came to exist, or if it ceased to exist. And if the universe has no value, it really does not matter whether it exists.<sup>39</sup> What could be more important than that?<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This idea seems to me implicit in the passages from Singer (2009) and Parfit (2011) that I quoted at the start.

<sup>39</sup> Kant thought that if there were no rational beings in the universe, it would be “a mere wasteland, gratuitous and without a final purpose” (Kant, 1987, 331).

<sup>40</sup> Some think that value properties are not visible from a genuine cosmic standpoint. But that cosmologists do not ascribe such properties is irrelevant, as I said. Moreover, if value is actually an illusion, it would also be an illusion on smaller scales – undermining *all* forms of (normative) importance. And if it is not an illusion, then nothing stops us from speaking about the value of the entire universe (see also Kahane, 2014, 747–748).

### Importance without Causal Impact

I said that Benatar's argument trades on two ambiguities. The first is the slide from impact on the universe as a whole to impact on *other* parts of the universe. The second is the slide from the idea of making a difference or impact at some scale to the assumption that this difference needs to involve a causal effect on that scale, or even to be causal at all.

According to the Solitary Significance Argument, we terrestrials might make a massive *non-causal* difference to the universe as a whole by instantiating all the value that the universe contains – though, to be precise, much of that cosmic difference is achieved by us making a causal difference to what happens here on little Earth.

It is easy to overlook this possibility because paradigmatic cases of great importance do involve great, and spatiotemporally extended, causal influence. Napoleon's decisions directly affected the lives of a vast number of Europeans, and their longer-term causal influence extends even further in space and time.

The very idea of someone having world historical significance without having any causal influence beyond, say, their tiny village seems preposterous. This, however, is because historically important figures like Napoleon gain their significance *by* their effect on the lives of many other people – numerous sentient beings that themselves have value and are spatiotemporally spread; and that effect is in large part also due to how people perceive, and respond to, the acts of the historical figure.

We cannot affect the broader universe in this way. This is not just because we do not have the causal power but also because, at least as of now, we are not even aware of any others we *could* so influence. If there *are* intelligent forms of life out there, then such influence is at least conceivable, and such far-reaching influence might even be in our future, even if that is unlikely. In fact, if the universe is teeming with intelligent life – if we are *not* alone – then such extensive causal influence may be the *only* way we could be cosmically important. But *if* we are alone, that is just irrelevant. We would not need such far-reaching influence to make a great difference to the overall value of the universe.

The overall value of something is a function of the intrinsic values of its parts. The overall value of a spatiotemporal region is, at least in large part, the sum (on some views, average) of the value that region contains.<sup>41</sup> Those parts

<sup>41</sup> The relation between the value of wholes and that of their parts is not always simply aggregative. For example, there may be Moorean organic unities, and some hold that the value of a whole can also be affected by how the value contained in it is distributed. But so far as I can see, this does not bear on my argument here.

of that region that do not contain anything of value, whether positive or negative – let alone those parts of it that are literally empty – make no difference to the value of the whole. What matters, with respect to what difference something makes to the value of the whole, is not how large or small it is, where it is located, or its spatiotemporal distribution, but how much intrinsic value it has, or brings about. Note how natural it is to describe the role a given thing has in determining the value of the whole in terms of what difference it makes – yet that difference-making does not involve causation but what we might call contribution (though, again, that global contribution will often supervene on local causal effects).

In this way, a momentary speck surrounded by vast emptiness can make a massive difference to the overall value of the entire universe even if it has *no* causal effects whatsoever. *Pari passu*, it can make such a difference without having causal reach throughout the surrounding emptiness.

It might help to move away from the grand cosmic scale to examples of such non-causal impact in more familiar territory. Consider first how a temporal part of a whole can affect its overall value without making any causal difference to the rest. Take a person's life. If an otherwise modestly pleasant life ends with a relatively short period of extraordinary suffering, that grim end can massively affect the overall quality of that person's life – how good or bad it was for her – even though it has no causal effects at all on any prior part of that life. That period of agony is obviously incredibly important in the context of that person's life – it is something you must mention when recounting that life. In the same vein, it is of immense world historic significance whether the last decade before humanity's extinction would be peaceful or involve great agony.<sup>42</sup>

It is not as easy to point to examples of actual things that have, or had, world historical significance, whether over time or at a time, without also having considerable, and usually spatially extensive, causal influence. But this is not surprising. First, the value of the whole is a function of the value of its parts, and something important must make a great difference to the value of the whole compared to other things that make a difference to value. In a world with billions of people (not to mention other sentient beings) scattered both spatially and temporally, it is extremely hard for someone to make such a difference without affecting any of these billions of others. Second, when something is

<sup>42</sup> But can't we say that the agony at the end of a person's life *caused* his life as a whole to be worse? But if we can say that, we can also say that what we do here on Earth causes the universe as a whole to be better or worse. If that is all that is needed to make a causal impact on the cosmic scale then the Combined View would pose no threat to the Solitary Significance Argument. But presumably that is not what Benatar means by causal impact.

important, this importance is often noticed, and being perceived as important has further effects that augment its importance. For someone to be important without causal impact, their initial importance must remain unknown, or unrecognized; so it is not surprising that it is hard to point to examples of such importance. This can skew our thinking about importance.

It is easier, however, to come up with relevant examples in the esthetic or intellectual domain since here individuals can create, or discover, things of comparatively immense value compared to what numerous other people create or discover. There are hypothetical cases: think of Kafka's work, which he had asked Max Brod to destroy after his death. Brod ignored that request, and Kafka became one of the most influential authors of the 20th century. Had Brod kept his promise, Kafka would not have this influence, and would therefore not be *as* important. But he would *still* have written landmarks of European literature – landmarks that, sadly, no one would have read. And he would therefore still be an extraordinarily important literary figure, even if no one would know that.<sup>43</sup> There may also be actual cases: think, for example, about Bruno Shultz's manuscript, *Messiah*, that was lost in the Holocaust. It may have been Shultz's masterpiece and, therefore, an important, perhaps ground-breaking novel that no one will ever read. Other candidates are Walter Benjamin's lost black briefcase, containing an unknown manuscript, and Rimbaud's destroyed 'La Chasse spirituelle,' which Verlaine saw as his masterpiece. These are examples of works that, if in fact great, merit being described as important even if they had no real causal impact.<sup>44</sup>

### Not Enough Value?

Benatar writes that

"it is possible to possess the *most* value without possessing *much* value. Even if we were the most valuable beings in the universe, it would not

43 Benatar himself mentions this example (*Ibid.*, 25–26) – arguing that Kafka's life was objectively meaningful even if he experienced it as meaningless; and Benatar *seems* to think that had Brod destroyed the manuscripts, Kafka's life really would have been meaningless. This seems to me doubtful but my claim is concerned only with importance. Note that Benatar agrees that things can be important without being known to be such.

44 Nozick (1989, 171) gives the game of chess as an example of something that has value yet is not important because it lacks enough impact. But the Value Impact View can explain this example. Value is not sufficient for impact, and the difference to value made by chess, compared to other things that affect value, is not large enough to make it genuinely important.

follow that we are immensely valuable. The value we do have would not be increased by the fact that there was nothing else of value. By analogy, the bowhead whale is the animal species with the *longest* lifespan of all earthlings, perhaps living up to or beyond two centuries. If it also has the longest lifespan in the universe, it would not follow that the lifespan is immense (when judged by the standards of cosmic time).<sup>45</sup>

Benatar is correct that to know that something has the most value (a comparative claim) tells us nothing about how *much* value it possesses (an absolute matter). Nor is something's value affected by what else of value exists. However, the Value Impact View makes neither of these assumptions. On this view, importance is a function of the difference one makes to the value of a domain compared to other things in the domain. So the existence of other things of value is meant to bear on our significance, not our value. If something decides the overall value of a domain then it is extremely important relative to that domain even if, in absolute terms, it possesses modest value.

It may seem odd that something with so little value could be so important, and Benatar's remarks suggest that he assumes that for something to be important it must possess (or affect) 'much' value. Call this the Threshold View.

The Threshold View cannot explain why the vastness of the universe makes us feel insignificant, since if we are not good enough, we will not be good enough even if the universe was much smaller and we were the largest things in it. And if it is taken to state a sufficient condition for importance, it is incompatible with the Combined View. Imagine a tiny spot of infinite value. That tiny spot, with zero further causal influence, and a minimal spatiotemporal extension, would easily cross the threshold. But on the Combined View, it could not possess any kind of importance, indeed, would be even *less* important than we are. Perhaps it is considerations such as these that lead Benatar to reject the Threshold View as stating a sufficient condition for cosmic importance.<sup>46</sup> But he appears to regard it as a necessary condition. What I say below applies to either reading of this view.

On one way of developing this view, there is a certain amount of value that one must possess to count as important. It is not clear how such an absolute threshold is to be drawn, and I do not see why we should assume that we do not meet it. Looking around, we find billions of humans and trillions of other sentient beings. This does not seem negligible. Moreover, if we fail to meet the

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

threshold, we would also fail to meet it on smaller scales on which Benatar assumes we are significant.

In any event, when we describe things as having immense or negligible value we do not apply such an absolute threshold. We draw a line that is relative to a comparison class, just as we do when we use other gradables such as 'large' or 'slow.' Compared to the value of that lonesome slug, actual terrestrial value is immense; in the context of a universe teeming with intelligent life and grand intergalactic civilizations, terrestrial value will seem almost negligible. But that is just my argument about importance, now stated directly in terms of these contextual value predicates. If the threshold adjusts in this way, such a threshold is perfectly compatible with the Solitary Significance argument.

Benatar's analogy with size suggests that the relevant threshold at the cosmic scale must somehow reflect a standard set by the universe. But this analogy backfires. Compared to the size of the universe, it is indeed an understatement to say that the size of a bowhead whale is negligible. But – assuming that we are alone in the universe – if we compare terrestrial value to that of the entire universe, we find that they are *identical*. So we turn out to have *very* considerable value by this cosmic standard.

I therefore conclude that we should either reject the Threshold View as a necessary or sufficient condition for importance, or think of the threshold in a way that broadly tracks the Value Impact View. Thus, if we are alone in the universe, we would be the most important thing in it regardless of how much value we realize absolutely. That humanity could have realized far more value is obvious. We are not nearly close to being the best we could be, let alone the best there could be. How far we fall short is a matter of debate. But this does not matter. Even if Lovecraft is right and we really are 'miserable,' we might still be the most important things in this universe.

## Conclusion

Physicist Laurence Krauss once said that

"The picture that science presents to us is ... uncomfortable because what we've learned is that we are more insignificant than we ever could have imagined. You could get rid of us and all the galaxies and everything we see in the universe and it will be largely the same."<sup>47</sup>

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47 Krauss, 2012.



And Benatar similarly writes that

“As impressed as (some) humans often are about the significance of humanity’s presence in the cosmos, our absence would have made absolutely no difference to the rest of the universe. We serve no purpose in the cosmos and, although our efforts have some significance here and now, it is seriously limited both spatially and temporally.”<sup>48</sup>

And he tries to console us with the thought that it at least matters at the terrestrial level, for example,

“whether or not one is adding to the vast amounts of harm on earth, even though that makes no difference to the rest of the cosmos.”<sup>49</sup>

It is true that if we disappeared, it would not make any causal difference to anything beyond the Earth – to the ‘rest of the cosmos.’ But we can now see that Benatar is mistaken in concluding from this that we cannot make a difference to the “rest of the cosmos,” or that the harm we cause matters only here on Earth. *If* we are alone, we make a vast (non-causal) difference to the universe as a whole and, consequently, also to the rest of the universe. After all, if we are alone in the universe, not just right now but across time, then *the total value of the entire universe is the same as the total value contained here on little Earth*. And if we miserably fail, then by our own acts, which influence just minor aspects of the Earth’s surface, *we have single-handedly changed the valence of the entire universe to negative*.<sup>50</sup> Yes, if you get rid of us, the surrounding galaxies will remain the same. But the universe will be utterly different. To remain indifferent to that possibility, to feel that what we collectively do can make no difference at the cosmic scale, seems to me astonishing.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>50</sup> See again Singer, 2009; Parfit, 2011.



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