

# The Theologian's Nightmare

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by Bertrand Russell

The eminent theologian Dr. Thaddeus dreamt that he died and pursued his course toward heaven. His studies had prepared him and he had no difficulty in finding the way. He knocked at the door of heaven, and was met with a closer scrutiny than he expected. "I ask admission," he said, "because I was a good man and devoted my life to the glory of God." "Man?" said the janitor, "What is that? And how could such a funny creature as you do anything to promote the glory of God?" Dr. Thaddeus was astonished. "You surely cannot be ignorant of man. You must be aware that man is the supreme work of the Creator." "As to that," said the janitor, "I am sorry to hurt your feelings, but what you're saying is news to me. I doubt if anybody up here has ever heard of this thing you call 'man.' However, since you seem distressed, you shall have a chance of consulting our librarian."

The librarian, a globular being with a thousand eyes and one mouth, bent some of his eyes upon Dr. Thaddeus. "What is this?" he asked the janitor. "This," replied the janitor, "says that it is a member of a species called 'man,' which lives in a place called 'Earth.' It has some odd notion that the Creator takes a special interest in this place and this species. I thought perhaps you could enlighten it." "Well," said the librarian kindly to the theologian, "perhaps you can tell me where this place is that you call 'Earth.'" "Oh," said the theologian, "it's part of the Solar System." "And what is the Solar System?" asked the librarian. "Oh," said the theologian, somewhat disconcerted, "my province was Sacred Knowledge, but the question that you are asking belongs to profane knowledge. However, I have learnt enough from my astronomical friends to be able to tell you that

the Solar System is part of the Milky Way." "And what is the Milky Way?" asked the librarian. "Oh, the Milky Way is one of the Galaxies, of which, I am told, there are some hundred million." "Well, well," said the librarian, "you could hardly expect me to remember one out of so many. But I do remember to have heard the word galaxy' before. In fact, I believe that one of our sub-librarians specializes in galaxies. Let us send for him and see whether he can help."

After no very long time, the galactic sub-librarian made his appearance. In shape, he was a dodecahedron. It was clear that at one time his surface had been bright, but the dust of the shelves had rendered him dim and opaque. The librarian explained to him that Dr. Thaddeus, in endeavoring to account for his origin, had mentioned galaxies, and it was hoped that information could be obtained from the galactic section of the library. "Well," said the sub-librarian, "I suppose it might become possible in time, but as there are a hundred million galaxies, and each has a volume to itself, it takes some time to find any particular volume. Which is it that this odd molecule desires?" "It is the one called 'The Milky Way,'" Dr. Thaddeus falteringly replied. "All right," said the sub-librarian, "I will find it if I can."

Some three weeks later, he returned, explaining that the extraordinarily efficient card index in the galactic section of the library had enabled him to locate the galaxy as number QX 321,762. "We have employed," he said, "all the five thousand clerks in the galactic section on this search. Perhaps you would like to see the clerk who is specially concerned with the galaxy in question?" The clerk was sent for and turned out to be an octahedron with an eye in each face and a mouth in one of them. He was surprised and dazed to find himself in such a glittering region, away from the shadowy limbo of his shelves. Pulling himself together, he asked, rather shyly, "What is it you wish to know about my galaxy?" Dr. Thaddeus spoke up: "What I want is to know about the Solar System, a collection of heavenly bodies revolving about one of the stars in your galaxy. The star about which they revolve is called 'the Sun.'" "Humph," said the librarian of the Milky Way, "it was hard enough to hit upon the right galaxy, but to hit upon the right star in the galaxy is far more difficult. I know that there are about three hundred billion stars in the galaxy, but I have no knowledge, myself, that would distinguish one of them from another. I believe, however, that at one time a list of the whole three hundred billion was demanded by the Administration and that it is still stored in the basement. If you think it worth while, I will engage special labor from the Other Place to search for this particular star."

It was agreed that, since the question had arisen and since Dr. Thaddeus was evidently suffering some distress, this might be the wisest course.

Several years later, a very weary and dispirited tetrahedron presented himself before the galactic sub-librarian. "I have," he said, "at last discovered the particular star concerning which inquiries have been made, but I am quite at a loss to imagine why it has aroused any special interest. It closely resembles a great many other stars in the same galaxy. It is of average size and temperature, and is surrounded by very much smaller bodies called 'planets.' After minute investigation, I discovered that some, at least, of these planets have parasites, and I think that this thing which has been making inquiries must be one of them."

At this point, Dr. Thaddeus burst out in a passionate and indignant lament: "Why, oh why, did the Creator conceal from us poor inhabitants of Earth that it was not we who prompted Him to create the Heavens? Throughout my long life, I have served Him diligently, believing that He would notice my service and reward me with Eternal Bliss. And now, it seems that He was not even aware that I existed. You tell me that I am an infinitesimal animalcule on a tiny body revolving round an insignificant member of a collection of three hundred billion stars, which is only one of many millions of such collections. I cannot bear it, and can no longer adore my Creator." "Very well," said the janitor, "then you can go to the Other Place."

Here the theologian awoke. "The power of Satan over our sleeping imagination is terrifying," he muttered

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