

Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 176 pages, ISBN: 9780300145182, cloth \$27.95. Reviewed by Tim DeJong, Ph.D. Candidate in English, The University of Western Ontario, London, ON.

According to a certain strain of contemporary thought, humanity today stands at the threshold of a new age of enlightenment in which the advancing of reason and science will at last defeat the backwardness of superstition and prejudice, and so usher in the dawn of a glorious new era. In order for this to happen, all those on the side of truth must take their stand against the defenders of irrationality, for the battle has never been fiercer than it is right now. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, along with other prominent New Atheists, are the leaders of this mission – one whose ironically religious overtones appear to have been lost on its crusaders.

This is the movement against which Marilynne Robinson takes a stand in her recent book *Absence of Mind* (originally given as The Terry Lectures at Yale University). Robinson is a well-known American novelist who teaches at the world-famous Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the author of three acclaimed novels – *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004), and *Home* (2008), which won the Hemingway PEN Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Orange Prize for Fiction (UK) respectively – and has also authored collections of essays, including *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998). She was recently elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. A passionate Calvinist, Robinson regularly attends and occasionally preaches at the Congregational United Church of Christ in Iowa City.

Robinson begins *Absence of Mind* by pointing out that the New Atheists and thinkers of their kind tend to operate under the assumption that we have crossed a major threshold in the history of civilization: “Before we thought thus, and now, in this new age of comprehension, we, or the enlightened among us, think otherwise” (5). But as Robinson points out, the belief that one’s own society has recently crossed the threshold from ignorance to truth – in short, that we now see the world through a fundamentally different, fundamentally more *truthful* lens than any previous culture – is a belief given the lie by the fact that it is (ironically enough) common to nearly all times and places.

All of which leads to Robinson’s typically cautious and carefully formulated suggestion that in matters of science it’s wise to proceed with humility, with an awareness of one’s contingent and limited place in the universe. For Robinson, the hubris of modern science is one of the main causes of the unfortunate opposition, in contemporary culture, between science and religion. Not only should these spheres not be opposed, they do not even stand in a symmetrical relationship to one another. Science, for example, “is a comparatively recent phenomenon,” whereas religion is “ancient and global” (10). And our culture is likely the first in history to imagine any real contradiction between the two.

The origin of the arbitrary divide between science and religion is rooted, Robinson claims, in an approach to science that is essentially wrongheaded – one that is in fact not truly scientific. *Absence of Mind* makes a forceful case for the possibility that the reductionist biology championed by many mainstream scientists today evinces not so much a deep insight into human history as a denial of it. Robinson takes particular aim at the self-styled “New Atheists” whose

books receive a wide mainstream audience today, but she is actually engaging with the much deeper tradition out of which these scientists and philosophers write – a tradition whose fundamental mistake, Robinson argues, lies in its deep and abiding mistrust of the experience of the individual mind.

What are the origins of this mistrust? Several key late modern thinkers play a crucial role, in particular Marx, Freud and Darwin. Robinson recalls having been educated to believe that “what we had learned from Darwin, Marx, Freud and others were insights into reality so deep as to be ahistorical” – never mind the fact that these separate systems of thought are “profoundly incompatible” with one another (21, 22). The programme of the contemporary scientific enterprise has been to attempt to subsume these theories under a grand humanist project of emancipation from the tyranny of the past, which for the New Atheists means the tyranny of religion. Robinson’s reaction to that project constitutes the thesis of her book:

I propose that the core assumption that remains unchallenged and unquestioned through all the variations within the diverse traditions of ‘modern’ thought is that the experience and testimony of the individual mind is to be explained away, excluded from consideration when any rational account is made of the nature of human being and of being altogether (22).

Robinson’s goal in this book, then, is to restore the individual human mind to its proper place of primacy in the accounts it makes of itself. As she notes in her introduction, modern science is insistent in its devaluation of mind; reading Emerson to an undergraduate class left Robinson convinced that today, we teach students to distrust the validity of their own thoughts. (I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s lament that man was “meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed.”<sup>1</sup>) We do not know ourselves: this is the hallmark of modern thought, and it is the assertion against which Robinson’s book pits itself. The suppositions of contemporary thought depend on its truth; yet its truth has never yet been demonstrated.

In *Absence of Mind* Robinson is especially critical of the hijacking of contemporary scientific and philosophical discourse by a kind of thought she calls “parascientific.” By this term Robinson refers to a sort of pseudo-science whose progenitors are themselves not necessarily scientists, one that uses the popular scientific claims of its time to form a general analysis of human nature which permits no exceptions, and which is unswerving in the application of its paradigm to all areas of popular thought and culture. Under its rubric one could place not only Marx, Freud, Auguste Comte and the like, but their modern disciples of whatever discipline – Daniel Dennett, Stephen Pinker, and Richard Dawkins, to name a few. All these thinkers, writes Robinson, tend to proceed under the unswerving belief that “science has given us knowledge sufficient to allow us to answer certain essential questions about the nature of reality, if only by dismissing them” (34). But as Robinson reminds us, “the human mind itself yields the only evidence we can have of the scale of human reality” (34). Any theory of mind that discredits or devalues the historical record of human experiences is by nature too limited in its approach.

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, [1908] 1995), 36-7.

In her second and perhaps most impressive chapter, “The Strange History of Altruism,” Robinson offers a case study in how such experiences are ignored or reframed to suit parascientific ends. Altruism is a facet of human experience notable in this context precisely because any application of altruism according to its traditional definition is denied by contemporary science. On the materialist account, the only thing altruism *cannot* be is just what, on the face of it, it appears to be. The various explanations materialists have offered for the emergence of altruism all hinge, Robinson notes, on “the exclusion of the felt life of the mind from the accounts of reality” provided by these thinkers (35). These accounts of reality are premised on the idea that history is guided neither by God nor by humans, but by an “objective, amoral force” of nature given various names by various writers (Nietzsche, for example, called it the will to power) (41). Whatever the rationales offered – most converge on the theme that beneath its veneer of selflessness, altruistic behaviour is somehow self-serving on a biological or genetic level – what remains necessarily true on this Darwinian account is that human beings are fundamentally self-deceived. What we call altruism *must* be something else entirely – not because the evidence suggests it, but because altruism needs to be reinterpreted in order to align with an evolutionistic worldview. Thus Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker and other contemporary scientists are forced, by their own presuppositions, to offer us a picture of the mind as merely “a passive conduit of other purposes than those the mind ascribes to itself.” (71) Or in E.O. Wilson’s words, “the brain is a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive” (51). As Robinson humorously sums it up, “A central tenet of the modern world view is that we do not know our own minds, our own motives, our own desires. And – an important corollary – certain well-qualified others *do* know them” (59).

The unavoidable conclusion of this line of thinking is that on the atheistic evolutionary account, there is a powerful disconnect between the world as it appears to us and the world as it actually is. And here Robinson unleashes a series of questions with a rhetorical force she seems to have been saving up for this juncture. “All this is plausible,” she says,

if the testimony of humankind is not to be credited, if reflection and emotion are only the means by which the genes that have colonized us manipulate us for their purposes. How are “we” to be located in all this? What are “we” if we must be bribed and seduced by illusory sensations we call love or courage or benevolence? Why need our genes conjure these better angels . . .? . . . What are “we” if our hopes of ourselves are higher than, or contrary to, the reality by which we are in fact governed? (61-2)

Robinson’s point here is that the materialist accounts of human nature ultimately put into question the very possibility of our self-identification as human beings. The problem of altruism is merely one instance of a much graver epistemological quandary: the difficult fact that for the parascientific materialist, love is merely lust, self-sacrifice merely self-interest, spirituality merely superstition, thought itself merely neurons firing. All our higher virtues – courage, honour, benevolence – are only shadows of the realities we suppose them to be. Robinson rightly insists that such a world is manifestly not the world we experience, nor does it equate with the accounts of self and mind that have guided Western philosophy from antiquity. Her question to the New Atheists is, in a nutshell: Why deny so much of what human experience assumes at face value to be real and valid? Why not accept and trust the testimony of the individual human mind? And if by some chance we are all deluded, what brought about the necessity of all these illusions in the first place? Why would nature follow such an odd and wondrous and circuitous route to

achieve the mindless and patternless ends of an evolutionary process that – to be precise – has no real “ends” at all?

As we’ve already seen, one of the telling features of the parascientific mindset is its tendency to suppose itself as ahistorical – an objective commentary on culture and history rather than a product of it. It is fitting, then, that in her chapter on Sigmund Freud, whose contribution to parascience she calls “the greatest and most interesting contribution” of all, Robinson emphasizes the importance of understanding his work within a historical context. The Austria in which Freud lived and worked was, like the rest of central Europe in the early twentieth century, obsessed with questions of racial difference and of the superiority of culture over civilization. Against this historical background, Freud developed a view of the human being that transcends race, nationality and history. We all are initiated into human civilization through the experiencing of a primal scene which, whatever its particulars, invariably proves foundational in the formation of the repressed sexual desires that attend our later, developed selves. That is to say, for Freud, all external differences – ethnic, cultural or otherwise – are subsumed under human sexuality, which proves to be the basis of the psyche itself. Freud also conceives of the self as an organism constantly under assault from its environment and in search of stasis and rest; this too, Robinson argues, makes perfect sense given his historical situation as a Jew living and working in a time of increasing anti-Semitism.

Robinson’s final chapter, “Thinking Again,” sums up her previous arguments by focusing more closely on the question of mind. For the most part, her approach limits itself to a criticism of what others have said, and this is not unreasonable; a question as vexing and problematic as the definition and origin of the human mind can hardly even be broached in the space of a short chapter. Her suggestions, when they do appear, are precise and to the point: “Let us say the mind is what the brain does” (113). Such a statement is, of course, the beginning and not the end of any thorough inquiry. Indeed, a fair – if qualified – criticism of Robinson’s book may be that it reminds us of the questions we have not yet answered more than it attempts to answer them. *Absence of Mind* is intended to be a critical engagement with the recent development of a theoretical tradition, not a foray into unknown territory; and as such, it achieves what it sets out to do. But those who are not on Robinson’s side in the culture wars will surely notice that among the great modern thinkers, she offers a close analysis only of Freud, whose theories, while they remain significant, have been largely discredited in their particulars by contemporary scientists. If Robinson had chosen to delve into Marx, Nietzsche, or Darwin – expanding on the differences between their ideas while reiterating that all-important commonality, their dismissal of the individual mind – she might have fortified her case considerably.

One further criticism of Robinson’s argument can be made. By claiming that parascientific theories fail because they ignore the significance of subjective experience, she seems to forego the sort of generalizing required to construct any theory of mind at all. “Subjectivity,” she writes, “is the ancient haunt of piety and reverence and long, long thoughts” (35). No doubt this is true. No doubt that what is called for is a theory of mind that is willing and able to take into account the hugely varied accounts and feelings that individual minds have experienced, or claimed to experience, over the centuries. But a theory of mind cannot, *ipso facto*, have as its basis nothing more than the undeniable fact of subjective experience. A general theory of mind must take as a fundamental supposition the Cartesian formula that other minds exist besides my own, and that

these other minds are in some way like my own. And this is one reason, I suspect, that scientific and parascientific accounts of the mind so easily elide the issue of subjectivity: a theory always wishes to generalize, not to particularize. No matter how wondrously individual each human mind remains, a theory of mind will insist by its very nature that this individuality is undergirded by a universal phenomenon – that is, by whatever it is about one human mind that makes it ultimately of a kind with another. The failure of modern thought, as Robinson demonstrates, is that the conception of the human mind it presents to us manifestly does not fit with the human mind through which we intuit the world. But that still leaves the mystery of mind unsolved.

Part of Robinson's point, of course, is that whatever "solutions" we attempt to impose on the question of mind are always broached and superseded by the expansiveness of our topic. And yet, if science has shown us anything over the last centuries, it is that a new discovery waits on the other side of every problem. If theistic philosophers have made great strides over the last several decades to construct a workable Christian epistemology, the next challenge – one that Robinson's book leads us to consider – may be to do the same with respect to the ontology of mind. We are not there yet, but the way has been partly cleared. In the face of this challenge, *Absence of Mind* helps us to see where and why others have gone so far adrift, and how we might yet gain a fuller understanding of the most complex and compelling aspects of what it means to be human.