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Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness From the Modern Myth of the Self (Book Review)

Robert Minto
Dordt College

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Student Review

Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2010. ISBN: 0300145187. Reviewed by Robert Minto, a senior philosophy major and Kuyper Scholar at Dordt College.

In her newest book, Pulitzer prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson intervenes in a debate that may seem remote from her concerns as a novelist. She tells us she wants to “examine one side in the venerable controversy called the conflict between science and religion” (ix), and she does so by examining the origin and argumentation of what she calls “parascientific” literature. But in this short book, via an argument as compact as her narrative style is precise, she does much more than that: she also contributes to the growing literature opposing the “New Atheists,” makes a foray into intellectual history, and, most importantly, implicitly defends the humanities, especially literature, as irreplaceable disciplines in our overall attempt to understand human nature.

Diverse heavy-hitters, such as Terry Eagleton and David Bentley Hart,¹ have responded to the popularity of the “New Atheists,” to Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, and Christopher Hitchens, among others. But Robinson does not stop at this popular polemic. Instead she treats these men as the most recent iteration of a larger literature. She treats their “scientific” atheism as one more instance of illegitimate parascientific reasoning, and she strikes for the root of the genre. Her rogue’s gallery also includes Darwin, Thomas Malthus, Sigmund Freud, Auguste Comte, Richard Rorty, B.F. Skinner, and E.O. Wilson. What connects them is a shared conclusion and a shared methodology.

Robinson wishes to trace an expulsion that all these thinkers have voted to be necessary in their different (and incompatible) ways. “Mind,” they think, should be expelled from our discourse. They all conclude that the testimony of individual minds, the experience of human subjectivity, should be explained away. (Throughout her book, Robinson uses the word “mind” as a shorthand for humanly subjective experience; my usage will imitate hers.) For example, Robinson examines how neo-Darwinists attempt to account for human linguistic complexity. In their account, verbal complexity evolved for mating purposes such that eloquence had a sexual payoff. To this, Robinson replies that “charming as the notion is that our proto-verbal ancestors found mates through eloquent proto-speech,” such an etiology is absurdly blind to how mates have been actually selected in recorded history, during which “it has very rarely been the case that people have had a pool of eligible others to select among on the basis of some pleasing trait” (46). In order to remain within the narrow walls of possible explanations

for human experience, however, the neo-Darwinists have to resort to treating the subjective experience of any kind of altruism as a self-delusion. Robinson examines numerous other instances of supposedly scientific rejection of humanly subjective experience, but she doesn’t confine herself to outraged summaries or sardonic comments. She believes she can make out a common methodology. This methodology is the glue that holds together the new genre of “parascientific” literature that she presumes to delineate.

Robinson describes the methodology like this: “Some allusion to the science of the moment is used as the foundation for extrapolations and conclusions that fall far outside the broadest definitions of science” (43) and yet claim the authority of science. So, for example, E.O. Wilson extrapolates from his entomological research the sociobiological claim that the human brain is purely an instrument for survival, its operations explicable in those terms. Or Malthus extrapolates, from “Peter Townsend’s observations of overpopulation and starvation among dogs stranded on an island stocked with sheep” (40), that alleviating the starvation of Britain’s lower classes would only make them worse off. Or Darwin extrapolates from the biology of origins that Europeans are supreme.² All of these extrapolations require the exclusion of vast tracts of subjective experience, require that we, in order to accept them, mistrust the felt life of our minds. So the “absence of mind” referred to in Robinson’s title is both the common conclusion of the parascientific literature she examines and also its common premise.

Even the profound and serious can fall into the parascientific trap. Robinson devotes one whole chapter to discussing Freud. She begins by recalling Freud’s well-known interactions with his one-time disciple Jung, to whom he insisted that they must never abandon the sexual theory, according to which any kind of “spirituality”³ was explained as repressed sexuality. He told Jung they must make of this theory “an unshakeable bulwark” (78). Having thus established that Freud sometimes reasoned parascientifically, Robinson surprises us again. Freud is not to be classed with the figures discussed previously, like Dawkins and Malthus. This is because “in a Europe fascinated by notions of the radical importance of racial, cultural, and national difference, Freud is creating another, opposing anthropology, one that excludes these categories altogether” (81). In place of the differences between “races”

and civilizations, he proposed the universality of a psyche formed by the primal event of parricide. His oeuvre should be interpreted as a radical *political* offering. It sinks, however, to the level of the parascientific for posterity because we ignore the historical (subjective!) context of Freud and his conversation partners. Also, Robinson points out his parascientific assumption that the unstable condition of his Europe, and consequently the myth of the psyche by which he explained and interpreted it, was normative. Freud was one side of an “odd, post-metaphysical conversation, an early instance of the conversation that is uniquely modern,” so that while we may bless him for his political intentions, we may also deplore the conversation as a whole because it partook of the parascientific method and conclusion that the mind is “not to be credited” (104). Robinson’s book is probably worthwhile even just for this excursion into intellectual history.

To return to Robinson’s initial claim that she is writing about the conflict between science and religion, how does the parascientific absence of mind relate to this conflict? According to Robinson, this conflict is more rumored than real. It has been most publicly perpetuated by parascientific literature; consequently, it is not a conflict between science and religion but between religion and illegitimate extrapolations from science. Religion’s form of knowing is one instance of the larger way of knowing that Robinson relates to “mind.” It is the supreme humanly subjective experience. Robinson goes to William James’s definition of religion from his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to argue that religion’s essence is solitary and inward. Religion, in short, is the paramount function of mind; if mind is self-deception, religion is the paramount self-deception.⁴ Robinson’s book was collected from her Terry Lectures at Yale, lectures annually delivered on the relation of science and religion; but she performs a remarkable rhetorical maneuver with this theme: the conflict of science and religion turns out to be a front for a more pervasive conflict, the conflict between parasceince and “mind.”

While the careful reader may find Robinson’s own analysis reductive at points—for instance, she uncarefully periodizes and characterizes the “modern,” and she relies upon William James’s dubious individualist understanding of religion that seems to forget its social dimensions⁵—on the whole she emerges in this book as a powerful defender of the interpretive value of human subjectivity,

of a non-reductive account of the world. One feels, at the end, an urge to return to her novels, her supremely sensitive explorations of human subjectivity, equipped with a theoretical understanding of their value. Thus, while *Absence of Mind* at first appears remote from the concerns of Robinson the novelist, its ultimate effect is to rehabilitate humane studies, to demonstrate the necessity of descriptions of mind, like her novels, for the study of human nature.

Endnotes

1. See *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, by Terry Eagleton, and *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, by David Bentley Hart.
2. Robinson distinguishes between Darwin’s parascientific arguments and his legitimate scientific work: so, for instance, between *The Descent of Man* and *The Origin of Species* (52-53).
3. Jung: “in the intellectual, not the supernatural sense” (77).
4. In fact, reminding us of the preference of Rev. John Ames in her novel *Gilead*, Robinson writes that “if I were not myself a religious person, but wished to make an account of religion, I believe I would tend toward the Feuerbachian view that religion is a human projection of humanity’s conceptions of beauty, goodness, power, and other valued things, a humanizing of experience by understanding it as structured around and mirroring back those values” (127).
5. She does attempt to deflect this criticism, arguing that James’s focus upon individual accounts of inward experience (which never include the experience of corporate worship for example) takes place within a denominational context and bears strong resemblance to accounts that emerged from the two Great Awakenings. But these observations don’t obviate the fact that James considered religion an entirely private, solitary, internal phenomenon.

Erratum:

In the June issue, see Laurence C. Sibley, Jr.’s review of James K. A. Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. The last line of the third paragraph should read, “His *Desiring the Kingdom* argues that it is the heart that leads because it is the heart that hungers for and loves the kingdom; and imagines what that kingdom might be” (32).