

Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self

By Marilynne Robinson

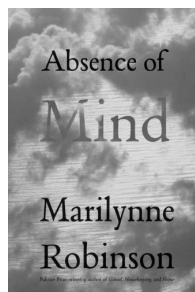
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Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

This volume contains the edited text of a series of lectures delivered by Marilynne Robinson at Yale, as part of a distinguished series on “Religion in the Light of Science”. Professor Robinson is an award-winning novelist (*Gilead* won the Pulitzer in 2005, and *Home* garnered the Orange Prize in 2009) and one of the foremost intellectuals and essayists presently writing in America (see, in particular, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, Picador, 2005). Her works reflect a strong

spiritual sensitivity and her essays on religion, history and the state of contemporary society are both probing in their insights and eloquent in their arguments. In this new book, she takes up a theme that has engaged her previously—particularly in several essays in which she has been critical of neo-Darwinian evolution—about certain tendencies of science to overreach itself, especially with regard to its attempts to explain the mind in purely materialist terms. Her argument is that scientific reductionism is not only spiritually impoverishing but, as a reactionary polemic to religion, is also not true to its own tenets. She states her aims as follows:

What I wish to question are not the methods of science, but the methods of a kind of argument that claims the authority of science or highly specialized knowledge, that assumes a protective coloration that allows it to pass for science yet does not practice the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished.



She labels this usurping and false “science” as “parascientific”, and she targets in particular the positivist legacy of Auguste Comte, which sought to banish metaphysics. She comments in this regard:

Positivism was intended to banish the language of metaphysics as meaningless, and it supplied in its place a systematically reductionist conceptual vocabulary, notably in the diverse interpretations of human nature it seemed to endorse.

She observes that positivism, which was unable to deal with the metaphysical reality of God as the Unmoved Mover, precisely because it eluded the positivist categories that sought to limit the Absolute and Infinite to the comparable and the measurable, would be confounded by discoveries of modern-day quantum physics—in particular with regard to the porous threshold between subjective and objective reality—which are discovering that physical reality is at its core equally elusive. Referring to the “ontological unlike-ness of God to the categories to which the human mind has recourse”, she states:

What cannot be measured or compared clearly cannot be unmoved in any ordinary sense of that word. That is exactly the kind of language positivism finds meaningless, though in its reaching beyond accustomed categories embedded in language it resembles nothing so much as contemporary physics.

The assumptions of positivism have spilled over into the so-called sociological and anthropological “sciences” and have bred what Robinson terms the “hermeneutics of condescension”, particularly in regard to parascientific attitudes toward religion:

...religion is a point of entry for certain anthropological methods and assumptions whose tendencies are distinctly invidious. It is treated as proof of persisting primitivity among human beings that legitimizes the association of all religion with the lowest estimate Europeans have made of aboriginal practices, and legitimizes also the assumption that humankind itself is fearful, irrational, deluded, and self-deceiving, excepting, of course, these missionaries of enlightenment.

She castigates “the kind of claim to the intellectual high ground that is perhaps the most consistent feature of the kind of thought that styles itself modern”, deriding what William James called “the power of the intellect to shallow”, and she questions the validity of the unchallenged and unquestioned core assumption that is common to the diverse traditions of “modern” thought: 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.”

Declaring that “whoever controls the definition of mind controls the definition of humankind itself, and culture, and history”, and her own bias that “it is only prudent to make a very high estimate of human nature, first of all in order to contain the worst impulses of human nature, and then to liberate its best impulses”, Robinson cautions against asserting “a closed ontology”—that is, “to say we know all we need to know in order to assess and define human nature and circumstance.” She remarks,

The voices that have said, “There is something more, knowledge to be had beyond and other than this knowledge,” have always been right. If there is one great truth contained in the Gilgamesh epic and every other epic venture of human thought, scientific or philosophical or religious, it is that the human mind itself yields the only evidence we can have of the scale of human reality.

Robinson proposes that a significant factor contributing to the modern malaise is “the exclusion of the felt life of the mind from the accounts of reality proposed by the oddly authoritative and deeply influential parascientific literature that has long associated itself with intellectual progress, and the exclusion of felt life from the varieties of thought and art that reflect the influence of these accounts.”

Neo-Darwinism, which Robinson targets as an example of the parascientific genre—saying that it “feels like a rear-guard action, a nostalgia for the lost certitudes of positivism”—has notably been ineffective to explain how altruistic acts conform to its theory:

Altruism has been and still is an issue because Darwinist evolutionary theory has considered it to be one. Why would altruism persist as a trait, when evolution would necessarily select against the conferring of benefit to another at cost to oneself?

Similarly, she cites Freud’s aversion to spirituality, and his desire to explain it away in terms of sexuality, noting this as an example of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—the positivist mistrust of the mysteriousness of the mind. Freud’s view—with its affinity to social Darwinist and neo-Darwinist assumptions—was that the mind could not be trusted, leading to his “severely narrow construction of the mind, suspicious of every impulse and motive that does not seem to express the few but potent urges of the primitive self...”

By contrast, religion has always offered human beings an opening into

mystery—a path of inwardness without “epistemic closure”—as Wolfgang Smith has argued in this journal.¹ In an eloquent passage, Robinson remarks on this intimate opening into mystery:

Our religious traditions give us as the name of God two deeply mysterious words, one deeply mysterious utterance: I AM. Putting to one side the question of their meaning as the name and the character by which the God of Moses would be known, these are words any human being can say about herself, and does say, though always with a modifier of some kind. I am hungry, I am comfortable, I am a singer, I am a cook. The abrupt descent into particularity in every statement of this kind, Being itself made auxiliary to some momentary accident of being, may only startle in the dark of the night, when the intuition comes that there is no proportion between the great given of existence and the narrow vessel of circumstance into which it is inevitably forced. “I am Ozymandias, king of kings. Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.”

It is precisely this inwardness that is excluded, Robinson argues, in the “declension, from the ethereality of the mind/soul as spirit to the reality of the mind/brain as a lump of meat”—which is predicated on the outmoded view of the dualism between mind and matter:

...The old notion of dualism should be put aside, now that we know a little about the uncanny properties of the finer textures of the physical. If, as some have suggested, quantum phenomena govern the brain, evidence for the fact is not likely to be found in scrutiny of the lobes or glands or by means of any primitive understanding of the brain’s materiality.

What the mind/body dichotomy does not adequately explain, Robinson argues, is its own functioning “self-awareness”—that is, of “the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises.” Nor, we would add, of the transcendent Self that is the detached observer, as in the Vedantic parable of the two birds:

“Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions, the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the selfsame tree. The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree; the latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.” (*Mundaka Upanishad* 3:1:1)

In response to the argument of the neo-Darwinists that the “evolutionary epic” explains the brain exhaustively, Robinson comments:

But “the material” itself is an artifact of the scale at which we perceive. We know that we abide with quarks and constellations, in a reality unknowable by us in a degree we will never be able to calculate, but reality all the same, the stuff and the matrix of our

¹ Wolfgang Smith, “Science and Epistemic Closure”, *Sacred Web* 16, January 2006.

supposedly quotidian existence.

This “unknowable reality” belies the gospel of scientific positivism which, Robinson argues, has sought, since Auguste Comte, to declare scientific knowledge effectively complete. She contrasts this reductive approach with the engaged approach of the scientific inquiry that remains open to the mysterious:

A difference between a Newton and a Comte, between science and parascience, is the desire in the latter case to treat scientific knowledge as complete, at least in its methods and assumptions, in order to further the primary object of closing questions about human nature and the human circumstance.

The spirit may not be susceptible to any form of reductive understanding, Robinson suggests, particularly when its theories exclude the testimony of human experience:

These theorists speak of the old error, that notion of a ghost in the machine, the image of the felt difference between mind and body. But who and what is that other self they posit, the hypertrophic self who has considered the heavens since Babylon and considers them still, by elegant and ingenious means whose refinements express a formidable pressure of desire to see and know far beyond the limits of any conception of utility, certainly any neo-Darwinist conception of it? Who is that other self needing to be persuaded that there are more than genetic reasons for rescuing a son or daughter from drowning? The archaic conundrum, how a nonphysical spirit can move a physical body, only emerges in a more pointed form in these unaccountable presences whom evolution has supposedly contrived to make us mistake for ourselves. These epigones exist because without them the theories would fail the test of comparison with human experience.

Robinson subtly reminds us that science needs to be open to grace. She observes, for example, that “William James says that data should be thought of not as givens but as gifts, this by way of maintaining an appropriate humility in the face of what we think we know.”

She questions the scientific assumptions behind the neo-Darwinist evolutionary model “that development can be traced back through a series of subtly incremental changes”—in particular the implication “that a species carries forward an essential similarity to its ancestors”. As she puts it, “A bird is not a latter-day dinosaur” and man is not merely “an optimized ape”. Rather, she suggests in conclusion, perhaps “something terrible and glorious befell us, a change gradualism could not predict—and if this is merely another fable, it might at least encourage the imagination

of humankind large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are.”

Robinson’s carefully crafted argument, though written by a religious person (Robinson is a practicing Protestant Christian), does not rely on theological arguments or traditionally metaphysical concepts to make her case—and it will therefore not be so easy to dismiss by detractors of religion like Richard Dawkins, who have sought to attack religion in the name of science. Rather, her approach demonstrates, using the logic of good science and reason, how the overreaching claims of science to exclude metaphysical realities are ill-conceived—and how reason, in the end, teaches its own limitations.