

MICHAEL GIFFIN

## WHAT MAKES A HUMAN BEING?



MARILYNNE ROBINSON HAS written three prize-winning novels: *Housekeeping* (1980), *Gilead* (2004) and *Home* (2008). Her latest book, *Absence of Mind* (2010), publishes her 2009 Terry Lectures, a series dedicated to religion in the light of science and philosophy. She's in distinguished if eclectic and contentious company, as past lecturers include Paul Tillich, Eric Fromm, John Dewey, Jacques Maritain, Carl Jung, Paul Ricoeur, Hans Kung, John Polkinghorne, Mary Douglas, Peter Singer and Terry Eagleton, to name a few.

### PHILOSOPHY & IDEAS

The sub-title of her book, *The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*, suggests to potential readers that she questions the assumptions about the mind, and about consciousness, which anti-religionists make, whether in the name of modernism, rationalism or science. For example, positivism—which limits knowledge to what is verifiable or falsifiable—excludes any kind of metaphysics from its model of reality and its definition of science. While Robinson believes the positivist view has merits—in certain circumstances—it has unfortunately enclosed itself within an old polemic. Although influential in shaping outdated definitions of modern and scientific—it has failed to develop and has become the blighted twin of what modern science now is. Even so, the blighted twin continues to inspire the pseudoscience and parascience espoused by celebrity academics. The overall impression of Robinson's book suggests an inverse relationship between a university's iconic status and its intellectual credibility.

Positivism intends to banish the language of metaphysics as meaningless and replace it with a vocab-

ulary that modern and scientific interpretations of human nature are meant to endorse. However, Robinson believes there's no way to reconcile the worldviews of Darwin, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. The one thing they have in common is an assumption that any metaphysical understanding of what it means to be human is fundamentally wrong. Singled out for rejection is an idea that persisted from the beginning of philosophy to the beginning of the modern scientific period: of the

human being as microcosm, as a small epitome of the universe. Robinson believes the idea of microcosm can't be rejected so

easily, because through its many variations it asserts a profound kinship between human being and the whole of being, a kinship which common sense tells us must exist, since our energies can only derive from and express the larger phenomenon of energy, since there must be compatibility between our means of knowing and the universe of things to be known. Why then, just as our capacity to describe the fabric and dimension of reality has undergone an astonishing deepening and expansion, must we reject the ancient intuition that we are part of it all?

Along with positivism came the notion that we know all we need to know once we've acquainted ourselves with a few simple formulae: that we're inheritors of primal guilt; that we've been optimised by competition and environment; that we're formed by economic forces and means of production; that we're moulded by experiences of frustration and reinforcement. These assertions have shaped modern thought but can't be reconciled with one another. The Freudian neurasthenic isn't the Darwinian primate, who isn't the Marxist proletarian, who isn't the behaviourists' organism. To acknowledge an element of truth in each of these models is to reject the claims of descriptive sufficiency made by each of them. What they do have in common, besides the claim to sufficiency, is an exclusion of the testimonies of culture and history, and their primary assertions make other

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*Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*,  
by Marilynne Robinson;  
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information about human nature irrelevant or subordinate to explanations that favour their theory.

Robinson feels their assertions are glib and self-serving. For example, according to the positivists, warfare is about attracting mates. The old conquerors may have meant to fling themselves against the barricades of fate and mortality but, in fact, through all that misery and disruption, they were really just trying to attract mates. What then, Robinson cheekily asks, is art? It also is a means of attracting mates, even though artists may have felt it was an exploration of experience; of the possibilities of communication; of the extraordinary collaboration of eye and hand. Similarly, the Freudian self is necessarily frustrated in its desires, and therefore generates art and culture as a sort of ectoplasm, a sublimation of forbidden impulses. According to the positivists, the first thing to know about art—whatever the account of its motives and origins—is that that its maker is self-deceived. Leonardo and Rembrandt may have thought they were competent inquirers in their own right but the positivists know more about them than they knew about themselves.

Not long before delivering her lectures, Robinson read to a class of young writers a passage from Emerson's 1837 oration "The American Scholar" in which he says:

In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach, and bide his own time—happy enough if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly ... For the instinct is sure, that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds.

These words caused a certain perturbation in the class, as the self is no longer assumed to be a thing to be approached with optimism, or to be trusted to see anything truly. Emerson is describing the great paradox and privilege of being human, a privilege foreclosed when the mind is trivialised or discredited. Robinson believes the clutch of certitudes that—when taken together—trivialise and discredit the mind are in need of being looked at again. That's what she does in this book.

**W**HATEVER ELSE IT is, the mind is a constant in everyone's experience; in more ways than we know, the mind is the creator of the reality we live within, live for, and often die from. As nothing is more essential to us, Robinson draws attention to popular contemporary thinking about the mind, and to its first premise: that

we as a culture have crossed a threshold of knowledge which gives whatever thought that follows the premise the status of truth. She has no opinion about whether science will ultimately arrive at an account of consciousness. Neither does she object to hypotheses being offered in an awareness that—in the honourable tradition of science—they are liable to be proven wrong. What she questions is the assertive literature which describes the mind from a pseudoscientific or parascientific perspective, which has as its foil the metaphysics of the self, still encouraged by religion, as a cultural residue needing to be swept away.

This assertive literature—vast and contentious—influences non-specialist or general readers who assume it has the imprimatur of science; yet it's published by celebrity academics who claim the authority of science without practising the self-discipline or self-criticism which distinguishes science. It's characterised by inaccurate definitions of religion—reducing all religion to its lowest estimate—offered to demonstrate how wrong religion is. The agenda behind this polemic against religion—which is now treated as brave and new, and is justified by Wahhabism and occasional outbursts of creationist zeal, but is really just an extension of eighteenth-century rationalism—is to assert a modern and scientific model of human being. But it really amounts to a hermeneutics of condescension, and, to condescend effectively, it's necessary to adhere to a narrow definition of the relevant data, or to actively misrepresent the relevant data.

One example comes from Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) which argues for a scientific analysis of religion in order to predict the future of religious phenomena. Dennett rejects William James's definition of religion as too inward or private, as describing "individuals who sincerely and devoutly take themselves to be the lone communicants of what we might call private religions", and on these grounds he classes them as "spiritual" rather than "religious" individuals. This is so he can focus on religion as a "social system" and insist on its demographics: on what is observable and therefore accessible to science as he understands it. He sheers off the contemplative or subjective side of faith; as if the collective expressions of religion and their inward experience are non-overlapping; as if religion is only what can be observed using the methods of anthropology, psychology or sociology, without reference to the deeply pensive solitudes that bring individuals into congregations and communities to be nurtured by the thought and culture they find there. Thus he is free to bypass John Donne and the Sufi poets and focus on a description of the practices of the cargo cultists: whom, it is fair to assume, no positivist will represent in the richest light.

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Robinson believes an interesting problem is being evaded here. The great quarrel in modern life is said to be between religion and science, and they tend to be treated as if they were symmetrical, presumably because of their supposed Manichaean opposition. Science is a comparatively recent phenomenon, though, for several centuries strongly identified with the culture of the West. Religion, on the other hand, is ancient and global, and, since it has no clear geographical or temporal limits, it persists as a cultural habit even where it has been suppressed and when it has been renounced; hence religion is not so easily defined: “definition” being a word which means, etymologically and in fact, “a setting of limits”.

Another example comes from Stephen Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), which defines human nature as genetically-determined behaviour, substantially shaped by evolutionary adaptation that evolutionary psychology can explain. Pinker debunks belief in the soul (the Ghost in the Machine), the myth of the Noble Savage, and in his view the most persistent of erroneous conceptions of the self, the Blank Slate. He takes these terms to be simple and naive to a degree Robinson believes is inconsistent with the seriousness of the philosophical traditions from which they emerged. In his discussion of the Noble Savage, for example, he offers a graph comparing male deaths caused by warfare in the twentieth century, which is presented as evidence that this rate of mortality among Europeans and Americans—as a percentage of overall deaths—is minuscule besides those reported among various contemporary “pre-state” societies who would have been the primitives in earlier studies. On the facing page, as an example of “pre-state” societies, he notes the errors of Margaret Mead in Samoa, the “gentle” Tasaday, and the “violent” Yanomamo.

Robinson finds Pinker’s discussion misleading, since Mead has been a soft target for a long time now, and observations about the Tasaday and Yanomamo have been susceptible to manipulation and hoax. Also, other questions arise. What is meant by warfare? Does colonisation itself fall out of the definition of warfare? Would the victims of warfare include the millions killed in those parts of Africa where rubber was taken for the armies of the First World War? Why are only European and American casualties counted? What about the non-male deaths? Don’t they count? If the point being made here is how prone societies are to engage in lethal violence, male mortality caused by war is too narrow a category to be meaningful, whether in the West, where there are records, or among any

“pre-state” people, where traditional narratives are unreliable records of the numbers involved. Finally, is it reasonable to debunk the myth of the Noble Savage by pondering any twentieth-century society, however remote or exotic? There’s a methodological sloppiness here which Robinson finds pervasive but characteristic of this important conversation and others like it.

**T**HE BREACH SEPARATING the modern West from its dominant traditions of religion and metaphysics is over the structure of the reality in which the mind participates. Does the mind open onto ultimate truth—at least potentially or in momentary glimpses—or is it constrained by biology and cultural influences? As Robinson reminds us, there is something uniquely human in the fact that we can pose such questions to ourselves about ourselves; questions that actually matter; questions that actually change reality. Clearly, whoever controls the definition of mind controls the definition of human being, its culture and its history. What Robinson laments is a regrettable but significant tendency—in the pseudoscientific and parascientific literature—to insist on a definition of the mind, and therefore of human beings, which tends to lower us in our own estimation. One of the characteristic traits of this large and burgeoning literature is its confidence—already asserted in 1848 by Auguste Comte, the father of positivism—that science has given us sufficient knowledge to answer certain questions about the nature of reality which excludes religion and metaphysics.

Robinson believes there’s an undeniable but odd power in defining human beings by excluding the things that distinguish us as a species. For this exclusion Comte isn’t to blame as, in the new social order he proposed, co-operation among people “must be sought in their own inherent tendency to universal love”. But then no contemporary theory now influential among positivists would suggest human beings are characterised by an “inherent tendency to universal love”. Comte wrote in the bloody period of European revolutions and counter-revolutions, and still he believed in the unrivalled power of “benevolent emotions”, but subsequent positivists assume only self-interest can account for individual behaviour. Comte had his revenge for the decapitation of his philosophical system, though, in leaving behind a word and a concept—altruism, or selfless devotion to the good of others—which has bedevilled positivists ever since.

In one of the earliest examples of positivist literature, *Data of Ethics* (1879), Herbert Spencer used two modes of scientific thought available in the late nineteenth cen-

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tury—Darwinian evolution and the observed division of single-cell animals—to take up the issue framed by Comte. He defended egoism in one chapter and altruism in another. His argument for egoism is Darwinian: “The law that each creature shall take the benefits and evils of its own nature, be they those derived from ancestry or those due to self-produced modifications, has been the law under which life has evolved thus far; and it must continue to be the law however much farther it evolves.” He then goes on to make a case for altruism based on his understanding of reproduction among “the simplest beings”, which he says “habitually multiply by spontaneous fission”, where “we see the parent entirely sacrificed in forming progeny”. He then expounds on the ethical, social and intellectual benefits and difficulties associated with egoism and altruism, proceeding in the way pseudoscientific and parascientific argument typically proceeds: some allusion to the science of the moment is used to justify extrapolations and conclusions that fall outside the science of the moment.

Spencer’s model is obviously insufficient, as far as altruism is concerned, and altruism remains a problem for neo-Darwinist theory. Robinson wonders—with her tongue in her cheek—whether the obvious insufficiency of Spencer’s model raises doubts in the minds of neo-Darwinist theorists when they are forced to acknowledge the problem altruism poses. Apparently it doesn’t, since what they do instead is redefine altruism so it conforms to their extremely parsimonious standards. Thus in neo-Darwinism, altruism has become the proverbial bad penny, liable to show up anywhere in a variety of parasitic disguises, mostly around the complexity of language and pair bonding. Robinson spends much time parodying these bad pennies, which inhabit a variety of evolutionary gene theories (in which traits are passed from parents to offspring through gene transmission) and evolutionary meme theories (in which traits are transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other cultural phenomena). While Robinson has more time for memes than genes, her conclusion is there are too many disputed boundaries between them, and, apart from the disputed boundaries, she feels gene and meme theories obviate each other.

Robinson moves on to make salient comparisons between the accidental and the intentional, and the consequences of one and the other for interpreting any theory. She’s come to the conclusion that the accidental has a strong attraction for celebrity academics because it simplifies by delimiting. Why is there something rather than nothing? Accident! Accident narrows the range of interpretation while intention broadens it. Accident closes in on itself while intention implies that—within and beyond any particular fact or circumstance—there is more to be understood. The anomalies that plague

accident as an explanatory model, particularly in relation to human mind, are no problem, though, if it’s assumed accident doesn’t explain us; if it’s assumed we are meant to be human; if it’s assumed we are meant to be aware of and capable in the ways of the mind.

What are those ways of the mind? Every poem, theory, philanthropy, invention, scandal, hoax and crime of violence tells us more. No aspect of reality, from this point of view, need be simplified to fit an explanatory model. One would think the inadequacy of any model to deal with the complexity of its subject would make its proponents a bit tentative. Quite the opposite, as far as celebrity academics are concerned, since they deny the reality of any phenomena they can’t accommodate, or scold the phenomenon for its irksome, atavistic persistence. This is surely an odd way for intelligent people to proceed, especially when they regard themselves as scientific, as accepting certain scientific insights that must lead any honest and enlightened person to embrace their view of things. Sadly, under their watch, our conception of human significance in and for the universe has shrunk to the point where the idea that we might be significant on a universal scale now seems preposterous.

**R**OBINSON’S OVERVIEW OF Freud is one of the best around. After summarising his theory and noticing its inadequacies, she does something few have done: describes its broader context—Western Europe at a particularly ugly point in its history—and provides us with insight into what he overlooked, what he excluded, what might have motivated him.

When Jung was remembering his association and his differences with Freud, as he neared the end of his life, he said:

Above all, Freud’s attitude towards the spirit seemed to me highly questionable. Wherever, in a person or in a work of art, an expression of spirituality (in the intellectual, not the supernatural sense) came to light, he suspected it, and insinuated that it was repressed sexuality. Anything that could not be directly interpreted as sexuality he referred to as “psychosexuality”. I protested that this hypothesis, carried to its logical conclusion, would lead to an annihilating judgment upon culture. Culture would then appear as a mere farce, the morbid consequence of repressed sexuality. “Yes,” he assented, “so it is, and that is just a curse of fate against which we are powerless to contend.”

Freud’s definition of sexuality has a tightly self-referential character which intends to exclude anything spiritual emerging in Jung’s thought. When Freud asked Jung “never to abandon the sexual theory”, and told him

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“we must make a dogma of it, an unshakeable bulwark”, Jung asked: “A bulwark—against what?” Freud replied, “Against the black tide of mud ... of occultism.” In the context of the time, Freud’s aversion to spirituality, and equating it with occultism, is understandable. (As an aside: Robinson doesn’t say so, but even the modern church was slow in distinguishing spirituality from spiritualism and reclaiming its pre-modern mystical traditions.)

What’s the background for this? Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe impressed itself deeply on Freud’s understanding of civilisation, religion and human nature, but in ambivalent ways. Robinson believes Freud’s work intends to counter an emerging pan-Germanic strain of thought that incorporates philosophy, psychology, anthropology, biology and linguistics to produce and confirm an ideology of racial nationalism. In doing so, Freud offers another framework of understanding which excludes race and nation as essential elements of human nature. The importance he attached to the Oedipal crime, and his insistence on the reality of this event and its consequences, seems incomprehensible as a discovery of psychoanalytical research but becomes comprehensible if understood as a strategy for creating a model of human nature in which there was no historical moment when—as Nietzsche claims—the nobility of pagan Europe was undermined by a Judaeo-Christian monotheism, derogatorily referred to as “Jewish slave religion”. Robinson never puts it so bluntly but—for simplicity—the essence of what she means is Freud avoided the issue of being Jewish in Europe precisely when being Jewish in Europe was increasingly an issue, and he did this by ignoring contemporary external realities and theorising timeless internal realities. Freud was burying his head in the sand.

Why did Freud ignore or downplay the issue of being Jewish in contemporary Europe? As the son of Jews who migrated to Vienna from the Czech region of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, he must have been aware of the violent hostility towards Jews and Czechs excited by the racial nationalism of the pan-German movement in the capital. Such was the atmosphere of the city where Freud was beginning his career and where the young Hitler was struggling to establish himself as a painter. It’s conventional to treat Austria as being on the peripheries of catastrophe—as swept up in events visited on Central Europe by Hitler—despite the fact that Hitler was himself an Austrian who developed his political views in Vienna. At the beginning of his career as a writer on the nature of the human psyche, Freud would have seen the emergence in Vienna of anti-Semitism in its virulent modern form. Yet interpreters of Freud treat his theories as if they have no historical context; as if they formed in a vacuum in the pure light of his per-

spicuous intellect. Freud cultivated this view himself.

As an American, Robinson finds it painful that Freud represented European civilisation as intrinsically healthier than American civilisation, psychologically speaking. In 1932, not long before the Nazis demonstrated their power at the polls, and Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Freud completed a contemptuous psychoanalytical study of Thomas Woodrow Wilson, in which the President weeping after declaring war against Germany in 1917—because he knew it would be a death sentence for many young American men—is given an interpretation which is more of a taunt:

A more masculine boy than Tommy Wilson would have felt hostility to the *mores* of the family and community in which the Minister’s son was reared; but he felt no impulse to revolt. His masculinity was feeble. His Ego-Ideal was not hostile to the ideals of his family or his community. The problems of his life arose not from conflicts with his environment but from conflicts within his own nature. He would have had to face those conflicts if he had been brought up in the comparative freedom of European civilisation. The screen of rationalisations which allowed him to live all his life without facing his passivity to his father would have fallen early on the continent of Europe.

The comparative freedom of European civilisation in the early 1930s, for a Jew, compared with American civilisation? What’s going on here? What are we to make of Freud’s contemptuous book-length psychoanalysis of an American president who apparently had an Oedipus complex; who unconsciously wanted to be his father’s wife? Why didn’t he write about Hitler, surely a more interesting subject for psychoanalysis? Why didn’t he write about the contemporary European context that anticipated and prepared the way for Hitler’s ascent to power? What does that tell us about his theory of self? The posture, the language and the extraordinary mythopoesis Freud sustains in his work are all aimed at making his theory immune to any criticism from a scientific perspective; however, while Freud claimed the authority of science, his work was never scientific.

**W**HAT IS A human being? One answer on offer is: An organism whose haunting questions ought not to be meaningful to the organism that asks them, as that organism lacks any means of solving them. Another answer might be: It is still too soon to tell. We might be the creature who brings life on this planet to an end, and we might be the creature who awakens to the privileges inherent to our nature—selfhood, consciousness, even our biologically anomalous craving for the truth—and

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enjoys and enhances them. Mysteriously, neither possibility excludes the other. Our nature will describe itself as we respond to new circumstances in a world that changes continuously. So long as the human mind exists to impose itself on reality—as it already has done so profoundly—what it is, and what we are, remain open questions.

To arrive at any view of the human being promoted in the pseudoscientific and parascientific literature of celebrity academics, we are obliged to put aside whatever is not to be accounted for in the apparently simple terms of genetic self-interest. Robinson says “apparently simple” because in every instance these theorists build in devices to account for the inadequacies of their theories. These theorists speak of the old error; the notion of the soul or Ghost in the Machine; the image of the felt difference between mind and body. But who is that erroneous self they reject, with its mind–soul, who has considered the heavens since Babylon, and considers them still, by elegant and ingenious means, whose refinements express a formidable desire to see and know far beyond the limits of any neo-Darwinist conception of utility? Who is that erroneous self they reject, who believes there are more than genetic reasons for rescuing a son or daughter from drowning?

Each of us lives intensely with himself or herself, continuously assimilating past and present experience into a narrative and a vision that are unique in every case yet profoundly communicable—hence literature and the arts—and we all live in a great reef of collective experience, past and present, which we receive and preserve and modify. William James says 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. The gifts we bring to the problem of making an account of the mind are overwhelmingly rich, severally and together. This is not an excuse for excluding them from consideration. History and civilisation are an authoritative record the mind has left, is leaving, and will leave, and objectivity deserving the name would take this record as a starting point. In practical terms this would mean doing as the humanists have done since the building of the library of Alexandria, more or less. Human beings never cease to express themselves in new terms, and the data at hand are inevitably flawed and partial. But the complexity of the object, the human brain, and all associated phenomena are at the centre of the question, inextricable from it. The schools of thought Robinson has criticised exclude the great fact of human exceptionalism, although no one would deny that human exceptionalism is a pure expression of the uniqueness of the human brain.

A primary assumption of the evolutionary model behind neo-Darwinism is that human development can

be traced back through a series of subtly incremental changes, and the terminus of all these changes is, *voilà*, the world as we know it. The neatness of this argument has always bothered Robinson, but she makes no refutation of it, nor is she interested in refuting it. She wishes only to point out that there are certain things it should not be taken to imply. For example, it does not imply that a species carries forward an essentially similarity to its ancestors. A bird is not a latter-day dinosaur. We can assume the ancestors ate and slept and mated, carrying on the universal business of animal life. Still, whatever the shared genetic history of beast and bird, a transformative change occurred over the millennia, and to find the modern sparrow implicit in the thunder lizard is quite certainly an error, if one wishes to make an ornithological study of sparrow behaviour. On the same grounds, there is no reason to assume our species resembles in any essential way the ancient primate whose genes we carry. It is a strategy of pseudoscientific and parascientific argument to strip away culture-making, as if it were a ruse and concealment within which lurks the imagined primitive who is, for them, our true nature.

Here is another instance of evolution, to illustrate Robinson’s point. The universe passed through its unimaginable first moment, first year, first billion years, first four-and-a-half billion years, wresting itself from whatever state of non-existence, inflating, contorting, resolving into space and matter, bursting into light. Matter condenses, stars live out their generations. Then, very late, there is added to the universe of being a shaped stick or stone, a jug, a cuneiform tablet. They appear on a tiny, teetering, lopsided planet, and they demand wholly new vocabularies of description for reality at every scale. What but the energies of the universe could be expressed in the Great Wall of China or the *St Matthew Passion*? For our purposes, there is nothing else. Yet language that would have been fully adequate to describe the ages before the appearance of the first artefact would have had to be enlarged by concepts like agency and intention, words like *creation*, which would query the great universe itself. Might not the human brain, that most complex object known to exist in the universe, have undergone a qualitative change as well? If Robinson’s metaphor only suggests the possibility that our species is more than an optimised ape, that something terrible and glorious befell us, a change gradualism could not predict, it might at least encourage an imagination of human being large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are.

*Michael Giffin discussed Darwin and God  
by Nick Spencer in the June issue.*