



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

*Marilynne Robinson*

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In this ambitious book, acclaimed writer Marilynne Robinson applies her astute intellect to some of the most vexing topics in the history of human thought—science, religion, and consciousness. Crafted with the same care and insight as her award-winning novels, *Absence of Mind* challenges postmodern atheists who crusade against religion under the banner of science. In Robinson's view, scientific reasoning does not denote a sense of logical infallibility, as thinkers like Richard Dawkins might suggest. Instead, in its purest form, science represents a search for answers. It engages the problem of knowledge, an aspect of the mystery of consciousness, rather than providing a simple and final model of reality.

By defending the importance of individual reflection, Robinson celebrates the power and variety of human consciousness in the tradition of William James. She explores the nature of subjectivity and considers the culture in which Sigmund Freud was situated and its influence on his model of self and civilization. Through keen interpretations of language, emotion, science, and poetry, *Absence of Mind* restores human consciousness to its central place in the religion-science debate.

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

Date : Published May 25th 2010 by Yale University Press (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780300145182

Author : Marilynne Robinson

Format : Hardcover 158 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Religion, Science, Psychology, Theology



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## **From Reader Review Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self for online ebook**

### **Amy says**

As usual, Marilynne Robinson's point of view--in this case on the question of our current cultural assumptions about the human mind--is refreshingly original, steeped in scholarship and deep reading, and thought-provoking. She places the current positivist, "parascientific" worldview in context, examining such influential voices as E.O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, Stephen Pinker, down to Freud and Descartes, and ultimately concludes that there may be more to the story than pure science can offer. Neuroscience and evolutionary psychology would have us believe that the mind is basically an illusion, and that we aren't to trust it; she counters this by pointing to the evidence of human civilization--art, literature, music, architecture, all of culture--and offers a liberating vision of a "humankind large enough to acknowledge some small fragment of the mystery we are."

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### **Jon says**

I have a hard time with Marilynne Robinson's non-fiction--I find her essays to be a little too allusive, too oblique, too given to assuming I know things that I don't know. I just have a hard time following her. I'm often unsure whether she's being ironic. Other readers seem not to have these problems. Nevertheless, from the 66% of this that I think I understood, I certainly was convinced. She comes down very hard on the "parascience" of our time--the Steven Pinkers, E.O. Wilsons, Daniel Dennetts, who write with the appearance of certitude about matters outside their fields of expertise. She accuses them--in one of the sarcastic quips that I actually got--of assuming that they're playing with a full deck, of assuming that what is discoverable by science is sufficient to explain everything. She finally comes down to a position which I think is pretty much my own--one sometimes called (not by her) "physical agnosticism." That is, she admits that everything may be material (physical)--even thoughts, emotions, and selves--but that we really are only beginning to learn that we don't know very much about what physicality means. Quantum physics has raised too many contradictions and anomalies about the underlying structure of what we take to be physical for us to be certain about much of anything.

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### **Stephen says**

I have to admit that, as a fan of some of Robinson's other work (Gilead, The Death of Adam, a few essays and reviews), I was disappointed with Absence of Mind. As a religious person who agrees with her thesis--that atheists like Dennett and Harris have missed something crucial about human consciousness--I didn't find the kind of rigorous argument for which I had hoped. Like the New England Transcendentalists, on whom she draws, Robinson is coyly vague about just how specific religious beliefs relate to specific, theoretically understood aspects of human existence. While she gets in some good jabs and some gotcha-style criticism, as Sarah Palin might put it, she ends up coming across as a bit of a know-it-all and less of a careful thinker here.

Some sections (such as the extensive historical background on Freud) seem oriented more toward showing off her (relatively) original research rather than toward building a coherent case for why her opponents are wrong. In the end, her case seems to amount to the worst kind of "God of the gaps"-type argument. Like

intelligent design theorists do with biology, Robinson seems to use human cognition as a means of saying "It's really complicated, too complicated for us to understand, therefore something beyond the physical world likely exists, QED."

Unfortunately, this is neither philosophically nor theologically satisfying. Theologically, it claims very little beyond that human beings are searching for something spiritual (which is true, but gives us little that someone like Sam Harris wouldn't affirm). Philosophically, it meanders through a ton of issues that are hotly debated by specialists without the kind of rigor that would convince a non-specialist like myself that Robinson has done more work in those fields than various specialists (philosophers of mind, metaphysicians, philosophers of religion, etc.) already have. Still, I gave this three stars because it is characteristically well-written, even if not perfectly argued or conceived.

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### **Sara says**

*Absence of Mind* collects several essays by novelist Marilynne Robinson, which were originally delivered as part of Yale's Terry Lectures in 2009. In them, she critiques positivism and its inheritance to many modern scientists who discount metaphysics and subjective experience in their inquiries. She particularly takes issue with those she calls "parascientists" (e.g., Dawkins, Pinker, Dennett) who reject subjective evidence in their exploration of consciousness and the nature of humanity, but do so without a thorough evaluation of metaphysical philosophy and thought. This book is exceedingly thought-provoking and very welcome to anyone peeved by the "hermeneutics of condescension" so famously employed by, particularly, Dawkins. I do not consider myself a religious person or a deist, but the condescension of discarding centuries of metaphysical thought without seriously exploring it first does indeed seem "para"-scientific and worth calling out. This was an engrossing read. Robinson's prose is sharp, dense and to the point, sometimes requiring careful rereading of a sentence here and there, because she packs a lot of ideas into each one, wasting no words. For a well-considered critique of Robinson's arguments, check out Julian Baggini's review in *New Statesman*.

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### **Corinne Wasilewski says**

Man I love the way this woman thinks. I've never given it much thought before -- the division between modern thought/science and the arts/religion -- but I've definitely experienced the fall-out and Robinson frames the problem in a way that makes sense. It's pretty simple actually – anything to do with the experience of the individual mind is explained away or excluded from consideration when modern thought/science (pseudoscience) makes any rational account of the nature of human being or the origins of our species. Reductionistic/deterministic theories do the trick as do sweeping statements that dismiss the mind as felt experience. Never mind that these sweeping statements do not withstand the rigors of true scientific analysis. All that matters is eliminating/discounting the subjective, inward experience of man. Once this is accomplished, the rest is easy: Abracadabra! Religion disappears. Hocus pocus! Literature, too. And history. And art. And metaphysics. And culture. Basically anything to do with human nature and the "beauty and strangeness of the individual soul". Anything that distinguishes man as a conscious, self-aware being doesn't count, and, by extrapolation no longer exists (at least not in the mind of the modern thinker/pseudoscientist whose ideas then trickle down to the general population). Ta-da! Man's humanity and dignity -- gone, all gone. It's been an insidious take-over and here's what we get for it: a cold, sterile world void of personal meaning. Not very nice of you, modern thought/pseudoscience. And maybe us lay

folks were a little slow to catch on, but, we're on to you now and we're going to take back what's ours!  
Provocative reading for sure.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

A clearly written and closely reasoned series of lectures--five in all--concerning the conscious mind, and how what it tells us is invariably excluded from what Robinson terms "para-scientific literature," e.g., writing that adopts the assumptions of science--and often an outdated form of science--to criticize religious beliefs and other spiritual assumptions.

Robinson takes issue with this kind of writing--often polemical in nature--because it adopts the prejudices of science without accepting any of its rigor, and because it excludes a valuable source of information about the origins and workings of moral impulses and spirituality . . . the human mind observing itself.

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### **Robin Friedman says**

#### A Novelist's Thoughts On The Mind

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize winning novel "Gilead" portrays an aging, dying minister in a small Iowa town who reflects upon his life and family, on God, and on the United States for the benefit of his young son. The book is written eloquently and poignantly. "Gilead" is thoughtful in its simplicity, but never forgets its form as a work of fiction.

I was eager to read more of Robinson. Instead of turning to her other novels, I found her recent book of essays, "Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self." (2010) I also found an excellent review that Robinson had written for the December 13, 2010, issue of "The Nation" of "The Heart of William James", a new selection of essays by the great American philosopher with an introduction by Robert Richardson. The Heart of William James (John Harvard Library) Judging from "Absence of Mind", Robinson has learned a great deal from James. In particular, Robinson focuses on James' pluralism and on his great interest in broad philosophical questions together with his scientific efforts. James opposed explanatory monism -- the effort to explain all human experience by reducing it to a single theory -- whether that theory was Hegelian idealism or scientific materialism. Investigative trains need to be followed where they lead but not necessarily beyond them. Human life requires a multiplicity of explanatory paths, and lived experience, for James, always has primacy over theory rather than the other way round. Throughout his life, James struggled with questions of theism and ultimately developed his own concept of an evolving God that, to the extent I understand James, owes little to traditional Judaism or Christianity. Much of what is best in "Absence of Mind" seems to me the result of Robinson's engagement with James.

The essays in "Absence of Mind" derive from lectures Robinson gave at Yale under the auspices of the Dwight Harrington Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the light of Science and Philosophy. The aim of these lectures is to broaden and purify religion by considering and integrating within its framework the teachings of the sciences. Accordingly, Robinson takes as her broad subject the relationship between religion and certain forms of thinking claiming to derive from science. Her broader subject is the individual human mind and its subjectivity and the creation of art and culture.

Unlike, "Gilead" which moves with simplicity and unforced persuasion, "Absence of Mind" is dense, difficult, and at times sharply polemical. The style of the book is elegant and shows the personal touch of a creative writer. And the theme of the book is akin to "Gilead" as Robinson celebrates self and humanity against various modernisms. There is a great deal of insight in "Absence of Mind" but Robinson frequently does not help herself, as, it seems to me, she elides important distinctions, moves too quickly at times, and offers illustrations and critiques that sometimes appear to have little relevance to the points she is trying to make. This short book is a struggle. It is worthwhile, but Robinson is less effective as a philosopher or essayist than she is as a creative writer.

Robinson targets what she terms "parascience" -- which many modern writers refer to as scientism. It is a form of reductivism that tries to show how scientific discoveries in one or several fields suffice to answer questions outside the field and to eliminate or rephrase questions of religion, philosophy or, broadly, human culture. For Robinson, these reductivisms, which are inconsistent with each other, brush away the individual mind, its subjectivity, and its ability to reflect upon itself. What she says is valuable and important. It seems to me that she doesn't distinguish clearly enough different approaches to reductivism. At times, she speaks in the language of transcendence, or Cartesianism, by apparently considering mind as a thing separate from physical bodies. Usually she avoids this ontological dualism. In the last and best of the four essays included here, "Thinking Again" she seems willing to grant that the mind in an important sense is "part of" the brain.(my term) She says that human inner life and culture cannot even so be explained solely in physicalist or evolutionary or other reductivist terms. This too is an important point, but it should not be conflated with ontological dualism, and it should be seen to be independent of any necessary commitment to theism.

The reductionists Robinson considers include Sigmund Freud in a long and interesting essay on Freud's metapsychology. Robinson does not challenge the analysis Freud made of individual patients (although she might) but instead she attacks claims that Freud made in his late books about the origins of civilization and religion in claimed universal acts of sexual repression. Robinson argues against this claim as reductivist and as based upon Freud's own extrapolation from the political situation in the Europe of his day. What she says is interesting but not necessarily convincing insofar as it proposes to explain the origins of Freud's theories. Other more contemporary writers that Robinson considers and rejects for reductivism include Herbert Spencer, and the contemporary writers E.O. Wilson, James Kugel, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, among others. The first essay, "On Human Nature", I found a confusing effort in which Robinson moves from James' treatment of religion in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" to other ostensibly scientific approaches to religion which would remove the importance of the heart of the individual. The second essay, "The Strange History of Altruism" argues that sociobiologists and other reductionists are unable to account for the prevalence of altruism in human thought and behavior. The remaining two essays, on Freud, and on mind-brain reductivism, are more challenging than the first two essays, and I have touched on them earlier.

Robinson is at her best when she describes the intimacies of the human heart and the achievements of human culture. Thus she writes well of

"the odd privilege of existence as a coherent self, the ability to speak the word 'I' and mean by it a richly individual history of experience, perception, and thought. For the religious, the sense of the soul may have as a final redoubt, not as argument but as experience, that haunting I who wakes us in the night wondering where time has gone, the I we waken to, sharply aware that we have been unfaithful to ourselves, that a life lived otherwise would have acknowledged a yearning more our own than any of the daylit motives whose behests we answer to so diligently." (p. 110)

Robinson writes well and convincingly when she speaks in her own voice and discusses individual subjectivity and human culture. She also did well in her focus on William James, a thinker who will repay

many rereadings and rethinkings. In her attacks on scientism, I think Robinson is broadly correct, but her considerations of specific authors and positions tends to be fuzzy and obscure.

Robin Friedman

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### **Jonathan Hiskes says**

I'm not normally interested in apologetics (i.e., rational defense of religion), and I didn't give this dense book the careful reading it requires, but I'm drawn to Robinson's sense that modern "parascientific" accounts of humanity have a deeply limiting conception of the human mind. Reducing us all to a bund of evolutionary impulses just isn't very interesting, never mind that it overlooks the collected wisdom of thousands of years of spiritual, cultural, and artistic traditions. "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

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### **Tyler Grant says**

The author was featured on The Daily Show and is from Iowa. The book sounded interesting so I picked it up. It is a short book, but don't let that fool you. The author writes in difficult prose more suited for a book on philosophy.

The main premise is very interesting and relevant as a balance to the scientific discoveries of the past few centuries. The premise is that evolutionary theory and psychoanalysis have taken away from our inward self. They do this by claiming to be able to explain all or a large part of our behavior. Sometimes it seems as if there is no place for people to make any decisions, they are just a product of evolution or psychology. For example, Freud tried to explain nearly all behavior in accordance to his theories. Evolutionary theory tries to explain all behavior in terms of reproductive fitness.

For an author like Robinson, and a member of the community of creative arts, there is something wrong with this. So this book is simply a high-brow rebellion against the modern sciences that purport to know more about ourselves than we do.

It's foolishness to throw out any useful information or methods from evolutionary theory or psychology, but I think her point is well-taken. The myth of self where each person can overcome their environment and can be more than than anyone else defines them as is a more useful and helpful myth of self than one where everyone is simply a product of external forces.

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### **Steven says**

Robinson dazzles me again with her non-fiction, this a somewhat continuation of what she explored in "The Death of Adam," that is the lack of intellectualism in today's religions. The difference is here she explores the proliferation of what she calls "parascience" - those thinkers from Bertrand Russell to today's Hitchens and Hawkins, who believe that since science has explained much of what the brain does, religion is no longer necessary. She refutes this claim and instead posits that even though science has brought us forward, there's

still an edge to thought and experience that it can't explain, a void into which philosophy and religion must probe with wonder. I was delighted to read her well thought out arguments on this case, as it's something I've thought about for some time now, how religion and science often ask the same questions, yet are so at odds with each other in our national conversations. If you've ever asked these same questions, or if you've read some of the previously mentioned authors, this book is a great companion.

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### **Corinne E. Blackmer says**

Robinson was invited by Yale to give the Terry lectures on the relationship between science and religion. These essays are the result of that invitation. It is quite easy to see why Yale wanted Robinson to give these lectures (in 2009). She had produced a first novel that was luminescent in its implied spirituality and, after that, *Gilead*, which explicitly deals with two Christian ministers and their theological beliefs--in an extraordinarily moving fashion. She had also published her fine essays on religion and science--the *Death of Adam*. So, she was a natural for this year-long position. However, this work occasionally has the aura of made-to-order work and does not, on the whole, have the punch of her earlier set of essays, *Death of Adam*. Having said that, her original essay on Freud (which, for whatever reasons, some other reviewers didn't like) I found one of the best pieces on Freud I have ever read. According to Robinson, many of the salient features of Freud's psychosexual theories can be traced back to the anti-Semitism he confronted in Vienna in the earlier twentieth century, which such passions were becoming virulently violent. The predominant view was that Jews were artificial and cosmopolitan outsiders who were not part of the rhetoric of racial and national authenticity. Against this, Freud produced a theory that set all human beings as products of a cannibalistic devouring and murder of the father, accompanied by guilt. Fascinating and convincing, particularly to this Jewish reader. There have been other complaints about the learnedness of this book, and reading it might require that the reader look up names and references. I enjoyed it much, without thinking it the best production of this remarkable, salient, brilliant mind.

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### **Alex Stroshine says**

In "Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self," Marilynne Robinson writes a concise, stimulating rebuttal against modern "para-scientific" thinkers who promulgate a materialist view of humankind. Like C.S. Lewis excoriating Gaius and Titius in "The Abolition of Man," Marilynne Robinson takes aim at certain thinkers, particularly Sigmund Freud, Steven Pinker, E.O. Wilson, Auguste Comte, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. She critiques the belief that humans are simply motivated by the desire to carry on their genes, arguing that this cannot answer satisfactorily the purpose of altruism. Readers of Lewis will also detect a clear rejection of "chronological snobbery" by Robinson; she complains that the thinkers she critiques disparage the past and naively assume that all of its ideas are outdated and outmoded. As well, she highlights how narrow parascientific thinking; if the cosmos is simply the result of accident, little more can be said about meaning or purpose whereas if it was intentionally formed by a Creator, this leads us to have to think about such things as purpose and telos. The point that stood out most for me was that Robinson notes that modern materialist worldviews contradict one another but that this is rarely acknowledged (unlike critics of religion who claim the contradictory tenets of say, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism thereby proves all religion false and illusory); the Marxist has a different anthropology than the Freudian.

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## **Adam Robinson says**

Philosophy is one of those things that people think they don't have when in reality all of us do. There are thoughts, ideas, and understandings that shape how we see reality and these form our philosophy whether we know it or not. One of the ideas that seems to be guiding more and more of us is that science has all answers that are worth knowing and any answer that cannot be proved or measured by science is therefore worthless or nonsensical. On the surface this would seem like a fair statement. But then so does relativism. A few seconds of serious thought however begins to show how thin a belief like this really is.

This is what Marilynne Robinson tackles in a series of lectures that comprise this short book. In serious fashion she exposes the ways that certain scientists speak of spirituality, the soul, and especially the mind, assuming that they have debunked all of these for lack of evidence. Yet all the while the scientists making such claims must use a mind that, for all their intellectualizing, is necessary to even make said claims. Her critique of Dennett, Dawkins, Freud, and others centers on their reductionistic ideas about our minds. This is sawing off the branch you're sitting on in that without your mind there is no actual person who can understand these ideas. It is remarkable how obvious this is once you weed out all the bluster and parascience of these authors and simply look at what they are saying. In short order it becomes patently ridiculous for the very simple reason that it doesn't correspond with reality.

Robinson is no mystic. These lectures are extremely academic (sometimes needlessly so.) She is not arguing against science in any way but instead is fine to live in the mystery that we, and science with us, simply don't understand all of reality. The weirdness of quantum mechanics, the existence of "dark" matter that fills 85% of the universe, and other scientific confessions should leave us with some humility when it comes to understanding who we are and especially what our mind is.

The New Atheists claim science as an ally but leave it behind in trying to prove such claims. Simply crying "no evidence" is no win against the soul, God, or the spiritual world. True scientists understand this. But parascientists, which is a category that is enveloping a lot of people who think they understand more than they do, are shutting their eyes and ears to such things while still pointing and laughing at others for (what they think is) doing the same thing.

This is a helpful book but fair warning, it's thick reading. But if you think you're figured it all out about spirituality and can simply wash your hands of it all I dare you to tackle this book.

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## **Justin Evans says**

Eh. A rambling, less coherent extension of the essay 'Darwinism' in her "Death of Adam," this one deals with what Robinson calls 'parascience,' essentially, the kind of populist journalism written by Dennet, Dawkins, Pinker and their ilk, with the 'problem' of altruism for their dogma, and with Freud. The argument here is weaker than in 'Darwinism,' and simultaneously more polemical, which means people are going to give this one star on the basis that Robinson is a crazy religious nut-bag who doesn't understand science, or five stars on the basis that she is a crazy religious nut-bag who rejects science. That she isn't, and doesn't, won't deter those reviewers.

The basic approach here is: many modern theories use supposedly scientific claims to make social-scientific claims; the scientific claims are often mistaken and the social-scientific claims are almost always ludicrously

reductionist (people are not, in fact, ants). Instead, we need a model of intellectual inquiry which grants to human beings a special kind of rich experience that we can call, say, 'mind' or 'culture' or 'art' or any of those big words. Parascientific attempts to 'explain' this experience are very bad, which should be obvious to anyone who has a facebook account and has friends who constantly link those 'scientific' experiments proving, for instance, that men in relationships lie to themselves about how attractive they find women, based on the assumption that all men find all women who are at a certain stage of their menstrual cycle attractive (and ignoring, for instance, the possibility that \*not\* all men find all women at that stage attractive). Maybe being in a relationship is something valuable that men want to hold onto more than they want to bang hot chix?

But nobody needs a hundred and fifty pages to make that argument, and the great one liners and beautiful sentences that you'll find in "Death of Adam" are sorely missing here, and her inability to understand German philosophy from Fichte through Nietzsche to Freud is on greater display. Too bad.

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### **Jeffrey says**

In this collection of essays, Marilynne Robinson starts out as a critic. Her targets are those scientific writers of the 20th and 21st centuries who have sought to take the products of contemporary scientific inquiry and blend them into a coherent commentary on the meaning of life and the universe for the general public. Ms. Robinson does not like their method of inquiry, their style of presentation or their conclusions. She labels it "parascience," and indeed it is. The scientists in question include those such as Daniel Dennett, E.O. Wilson, and Richard Dawkins who "present an assertive popular literature," attempting to describe "the mind as if from the posture of science." She seems to want to criticize such writing as shallow, in that it claims scientific objectivity without using "the self-discipline or self-criticism for which science is distinguished."

In making such a statement, she implies that readers like myself are deluded into thinking that statements about the nature of the brain, the self and mind, God and religion when made by these writers are true with no recognition of the limited nature of the scientific underpinning that might be present. That may be fun for her, to give herself a platform for criticism, but in the end it is nonsense.

Of course, she has no scientific background that I could discern, and claims none; she is just a writer. I find it strange that her writing is almost impenetrable with complex sentences and a vocabulary that calls for the reader to keep a dictionary at the ready. Is it really necessary to write in such an opaque manner to sound erudite and intelligent in criticizing those who write with clarity of the difficulties of understanding the implications of modern scientific discoveries? Do we really need to ponder the "hermeneuticization of philosophy" or "polemics against religion" as "hermeneutics of condescension?" And what is chthonic? Tell me before you look it up.

She disagrees with those who "attribute the universe in all its complexity to accident." I don't see that she takes a position in opposition except to show that those who negate the religious impulse, often using science and scientific explanations as the alternative, have failed to take into account the profound limitation of their own science and a failure to consider that their pronouncements are limited by the time and place from whence they arise. In this she is surely right, but it doesn't mean that the contemporary reader isn't aware that everything written today could be proven completely wrong tomorrow.

I did love her discussion of Freud and the way in which his immersion in the Austrian culture that was in the process of degenerating into Nazi Germany unconsciously infused his theories and writing. Hers is an

interesting and, to me, novel analysis of the great analyst. For some reason the writing in the section on Freud was very readable.

This is obviously a very intelligent and gifted writer who is widely read and thoughtful. Reading her musings on the mind and science and religion, Freud, Darwin and the meaning of life are challenging and enlightening. I hope to read one or more of her celebrated novels.

In the end, in her final chapter, "Thinking again," about the brain and the mind, she is eloquent as she writes, "here we are, a gaudy effervescence of consciousness, staggeringly improbable in light of everything we know about the reality that contains us." The human brain might just be "the most complex object known to exist in the universe." The brain is also just a lump of meat, but "the brain is capable of such lofty and astonishing things that their expression has been given the names mind, and soul, and spirit."

I share her joy and amazement at the very existence of the world, the universe and her mind (and mine) in it. I am reminded of a quote I took from Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in Search of Man*: "To our sense of mystery and wonder the world is too incredible, too meaningful for us, and its existence the most unlikely, the most unbelievable fact, contrary to all reasonable expectations."

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