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Re-Envisioning Humanism in a Reductionist World

Anna Elizabeth Hadfield
Bard College

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Anna Hadfield

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"I can only make sense of my unaccountable good fortune by assuming that it means I am under special obligation to make good use of it."

-Marilynne Robinson

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I. Introduction: The Crisis of Humanism

In 1933, a document entitled "A Humanist Manifesto" was published in a small but burgeoning American magazine called *The New Humanist*. The manifesto, which was co-signed by more than thirty writers, Unitarian ministers, and academics, including the philosopher John Dewey, announced the development of a new philosophy forged "out of the materials of the modern world." Religion in its traditional forms, the document stated, had shown itself to be powerless before the demands of the twentieth century and ill suited to an age shaped by "a vastly increased knowledge and experience." It had thus become clear that a new religion was necessary, one that would "formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method" and "discourage sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking." This new religion would recognize that man is a part of nature and reject any supernatural or cosmic accounts of human life and human values. It would look to many like "a complete break with the past," for it would "affirm life rather than deny it." This new religion, the manifesto declared, was called humanism.[1]

Modern humanism emerged in the middle decades of the twentieth century as an articulation of the first, pro-Enlightenment stance, arguing that rationality and science were the only means of rebuilding society and carrying mankind into the future. In *A Secular Age,* Charles Taylor characterizes this new conception of humanism—which he calls "exclusive humanism"—as accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing.[2] Many of what we consider to be quintessentially modern beliefs became consolidated in the twentieth century under the term humanism. Among these beliefs is, first, the idea

[1] "Humanist Manifesto I," Website of the American Humanist Association
[2] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 18

that religion is based on childish illusions, and that the inclination to religious belief is a temptation that the modern individual must resist.[3] Second, and as a result, human beings must dictate the ultimate values by which they live, for there is no higher authority on which to base human standards and norms.[4] Third is the belief, fostered by the rise of modern science, that the orders within which we exist are necessarily impersonal and indifferent to us, and that accepting this objective understanding of reality enables us to work towards the common good.[5] And this sense of the world as impersonal leads us to believe, fourth, that we must evaluate everything according to the standards of modern scientific and analytic thinking, and privilege knowledge reached through reason over insight gained through intuition.[6]

These core beliefs, and the Enlightenment values of reason, science, and progress which they espoused, began to develop long before they came to be associated with modern humanism. But the rise of humanism was crucial in that it united and popularized these beliefs as a worldview. Though humanism was an oft-appropriated term in the years following the publication of the Humanist Manifesto, it was generally associated with a rejection of religion and a championing of science and rationality as the conjoined hope of the modern age. Several organizations aligned themselves explicitly with the humanist cause. In 1941, the American Humanist Association was founded, an outgrowth of the previously existing Humanist Fellowship at the University of Chicago. In 1967, the Union of Ethical Societies, a British organization founded in the late nineteenth century, changed its name to the British Humanist Association. And in 1972, the Rationalist

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[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 563
[4] Ibid., 580
[5] Ibid., 543
[6] Ibid., 555

Association, another British organization and press, changed the name of its longstanding magazine to New Humanist. Today, humanism remains as widespread a term as ever before, perhaps even more so due to its appropriation by a group of popular atheist writers, called the New Atheists, whose viewpoints many in the humanist community have embraced.

From the time of its first stirrings in the Enlightenment, the appeal of modern humanism has been its promise of liberation from intellectual bondage. Humanism is grounded in the assumption that, for the first time in human history, it has become possible to see the human condition as it really is, without any otherworldly guarantors of meaning. As science teaches us more and more about the universe and about ourselves, so the humanist narrative goes, we are gradually abolishing the limitations to human freedom and progress. A society guided by science and rationality will not only be free from the constraints of religious dogma but will be animated by a universal benevolence, as religious belief is seen as one of the primary sources of hatred and conflict. In the 1933 Humanist Manifesto, the rejection of religion is framed as a matter of taking responsibility for the welfare of mankind. "Man is at last becoming aware," it proclaims, "that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement. He must set intelligence and will to the task."[7]

The notion that humanity has in some sense reached maturity and must take responsibility for human flourishing is integral to modern humanism. Taylor describes

[7] "Humanist Manifesto I," Website of the American Humanist Association

how this ethical responsibility, as it is envisioned and enacted by the humanist, translates into a kind of courageous affirmation of human life in the absence of God:

> The unbeliever has the courage to take up an adult stance, and face reality. He knows that human beings are on their own. But this doesn't cause him just to cave in. On the contrary, he determines to affirm human worth, and the human good, and to work for it, without false illusion or consolation …Unbelief goes together with modern (exclusive) humanism.[8]

In humanism, the acceptance of the scientific materialist account of the universe takes on a moral importance; it is seen as the result of a conscious decision on the part of the individual to resist the comforting illusions of religion and face facts, without relinquishing a sense of meaning and purpose. Furthermore, it is by this token that human beings become capable of grasping and controlling the world.[9] Lastly, and crucially, the humanist accepts that human beings have arisen from nature and do not transcend it; if human beings are truly unique from other animals, it is a uniqueness won through evolutionary adaptation, and can be traced as such.

For a number of twentieth century thinkers, the rise of modern humanism was evidence of a profound shift in the understanding of what it means to be human. Already in the 1930s, Winston Churchill felt the enormous changes impacting the fundamental beliefs of European culture. "I wonder whether any other generation has seen such astounding revolutions of data and values as those through which we have lived," he wrote. "Scarcely anything material or established which I was brought up to believe was permanent and vital, has lasted. Everything I was sure, or was taught to be sure, was

[8] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 562
[9] Ibid.

impossible, has happened."[10] In the face of astonishment at the loss of Western culture and religion, humanism claimed to affirm human worth even as it denied that there was anything special about human beings warranting this affirmation. It was envisioned as a great liberation, but it was predicated on a notion of freedom as the possibility of indefinite progress, as a gradual de-mystification of the world and human life. In 1968, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who would later become Pope John Paul II, wrote a letter to his friend, the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, reacting to what he saw as the fundamental crisis of the modern age:

> The evil of our times consists in the first place in a kind of degradation, indeed in a pulverization, of the fundamental uniqueness of each human person. This evil is even more of the metaphysical order than of the moral order. To this disintegration planned at times by atheistic ideologies we must oppose, rather than sterile polemics, a kind of "recapitulation" of the inviolable mystery of the person.[11]

Wojtyla's words reflected the deep sense, shared among many thinkers, that what had come to be seen as the essence of the human was in fact the opposite. In the ideological and philosophical battleground of the twentieth century, a new humanism had emerged that was not only anti-religion but anti-human.

One of the first thinkers to recognize the danger of modern humanism was the poet and critic T.S. Eliot. In the late 1920s, Eliot wrote two essays following the publication of a new book by the critic Irving Babbitt, his friend and former teacher. The subject of the essays was the doctrine of humanism that was at the center of Babbitt's philosophy. Though Babbitt's humanism was not yet a positive philosophy espousing Enlightenment principles, nor was it grounded in a polemical atheism, Eliot thought that

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[10] Quoted in Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 50

[11] Quoted in George Weigel, "John Paul II and the Crisis of Humanism"

the potential for these developments was latent in Babbitt's metaphysical assumptions. Babbitt envisioned humanism as the modern alternative to religion, an ethical stance suited for the individual who believed in the importance of acting according to one's own sense of right and wrong rather than in accordance with any external authority. But Eliot rejected this idea, arguing that the will needed external objects and values on which to operate.[12] He believed, consequently, that humanism could not work without religion, and warned that "if you find examples of humanism which are anti-religious, then such humanism is purely destructive, for it has never found anything to replace what it destroyed."[13] Furthermore, humanism had another main problem, perhaps even more worrying than the first: it claimed to uphold the worth and dignity of human beings independent of religion.

For Eliot, this was a contradiction in terms. To reject religion was to reject the idea that there is anything that makes human beings unique or distinct from nature. "If you remove from the word 'human' all that the belief in the supernatural has given to man," he remarked, "you can view him finally as no more than an extremely clever, adaptable, and mischievous little animal."[14] Humanism purported to affirm the meaning and purpose of human existence, but it offered no real foundation for this affirmation—or any of its moral principles, for that matter. In place of a religious idea of the human being, in which being human means being able to recognize the divine but never attain it, the modern humanistic point of view implied "that man is either perfectible, or capable of

[12] T.S. Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" in *Collected Essays,* 425
[13] Ibid., 423
[14] T.S. Eliot, "Second Thoughts on Humanism" in *Collected Essays,* 433

indefinite improvement…the only difference is a difference of degree—so that there is always hope of a higher degree."[15]

This new conception of humanism, Eliot asserted, was a departure from what he called "true Humanism," a cultural attitude necessary to society and to religion. Humanism in this understanding was a "mediating and corrective ingredient" in civilization, a sensibility that operated against fanaticism. It was "concerned less with reason than with common sense" and acted as a complement to religion and philosophy rather than as a substitute for them, always remaining "critical rather than constructive."[16] Indeed, Eliot thought that one of the possible functions of humanism was to re-enliven religious belief when it was in danger of falling into mere ritual and habit.[17] But he feared that humanism would become more and more a positive philosophy, destructive rather than critical, dogmatic in its opposition to all religious or transcendent understandings of human life.

In the wake of World War II, two other twentieth century thinkers devoted their attention to the question of humanism: Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. On October 29, 1945, Sartre delivered a lecture in Paris entitled "Existentialism is a Humanism"—later published as an essay under the same name—in which he rejected the kind of humanism that conceives of man as the "supreme value." Humanism in this sense, he argued, could only lead to a "cult of humanity" because it presupposed that there is a universal human nature that we can judge and worship.[18] But Sartre distinguished this false humanism from another meaning of humanism: that "man is

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[15] T.S. Eliot, "Second Thoughts on Humanism," 437
[16] Ibid., 436
[17] T.S. Eliot, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," 423
[18] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 52

always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist."[19] Sartre's conception of this "true" humanism was atheistic; it reminded man that he exists always in an "abandoned state," with no legislator other than himself, and that liberation was only possible through the acceptance of this condition.[20] But his conception was also mystical, grounded in the recognition that human beings only find meaning through self-transcendence.

In contrast to Sartre, Martin Heidegger rejected humanism not because it valued human beings too highly but because it didn't value them highly enough.[21] In 1946, Heidegger wrote the *Letter on Humanism* in response to a letter from a French admirer named Jean Beaufret, who asked how sense could be restored to the word humanism. Heidegger's answer was startling: "This question proceeds from your intention to retain the word 'humanism.' I wonder whether that is necessary. Or is the damage caused by all such terms still not sufficiently obvious?"[22] Heidegger believed that in proceeding from the definition of man as a *rational animal*, the entire humanistic or metaphysical tradition had conceived of man from a biological perspective that could never fully capture his essence as the shepherd of Being. The danger of separating human beings from Being was clear, for Heidegger, from Europe's past. Peter Sloterdijk, one of the most interesting and provocative readers of Heidegger, writes that "Heidegger interprets the historical world of Europe as the theater of militant humanism; it is the battlefield on which human subjectivity, with its portentous consequences, has acted out its domination over

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[20] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 52-53
[21] Martin Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism* in *Pathmarks*, 251
[22] Ibid., 241

Being."[23] What was needed was not a revived humanism, but a new philosophy that would recognize the ontological relationship of human beings to Being.

Though each of these thinkers—Pope John Paul II, T.S. Eliot, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger—conceived of the crisis differently, all of them recognized that humanism as it had come to be understood in the modern age was a threat to an ancient idea of the human essence. They recognized a distinction between true humanism, which was a commitment to the preservation of the worth and mystery of the human person, and a distinctly modern and false idea of humanism, which glorified and worshipped humans as the beings who could create themselves and control the world. Even Heidegger, who rejected the word humanism entirely, did so because he thought that humanism could never sufficiently account for the essence of the human being as it was claimed by Being. The rise of modern humanism was thus, for these thinkers, the moment when it became clear that true humanism had fallen into crisis.

Following from the positivist rejection of the Western metaphysical and religious traditions, modern humanism has proposed an account of reality as ultimately knowable and explainable, a closed system. It believes that we can provide an exhaustive account of the universe, of being, by reducing it to its parts and extracting from them final conclusions about the nature of our reality. This model has brought with it a new understanding of the human being as an object that can be studied and analyzed, and is likewise reducible to certain fundamental laws. Though one of the core narratives of modern humanism is the importance of accepting human finitude, it accords to human

[23] Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules for the Human Zoo," 19

beings a seemingly limitless capacity to know the world and themselves objectively, and envisions this capacity as the essence of human freedom.

In the name of rejecting childish "illusion," modern humanism actually rejects something much more fundamental: the idea that human beings have the capacity to apprehend and participate in a larger reality. This notion of the exceptionality of human consciousness is not unique to the Western religious tradition, the target of modern humanism's condemnation, though this tradition is one way in which this notion has been preserved. That human beings are somehow privileged among other forms of life in their relationship to being was an ancient understanding that conveyed a sense of fundamental belonging to the world. While this feeling of belonging may not have been lost with the rise of modern science and philosophy, it has come to be seen as a false and self-important illusion. In cutting off human beings from a larger reality and denying the human capacity for self-transcendence, modern humanism is in fact deeply anti-humanistic.

In my first chapter, I will look at the discourse surrounding evolution, which has become fundamental to modern humanism, as a case study for thinking about how the scientific worldview accounts for—or rather, fails to account for—the human being. In my critique of the thinking of various Darwinists, including Charles Darwin himself, I will also use the work of the contemporary novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson, who has become one of the most outspoken critics of Darwinism. In the second chapter, I will focus on two thinkers, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt and the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, both of whom I believe have recognized the crisis of humanism, in order to explore how they conceive of this crisis and its origins. In

the last chapter, I will return to Marilynne Robinson, whose fiction and nonfiction has stood out to me in its commitment to resisting the reductionist spirit of our times.

II. Evolution, Darwinism, and the Loss of Human Exceptionalism

There has been no greater single threat to the idea of human exceptionalism than the theory of evolution. Even before Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, evolution was a subject of tremendous controversy, provoking deep theological and metaphysical questioning about the role of human beings within nature and within the universe. We have seen a revival of the evolution controversy in our times with the rise of creationism and its more sophisticated counterpart, intelligent design. But neither camp has challenged evolution and Darwinism in a compelling way. Intelligent design has never really been taken seriously by evolutionary biologists because its arguments rest on very shaky scientific ground, while creationism has only served to cheapen the debate surrounding evolution by making it about Biblical fundamentalism.[24] By either contending with the science of evolution (intelligent design) or else rejecting scientific evidence entirely on the basis of Biblical literalism (creationism), the contemporary opposition to evolution by many on the religious right largely fails to address meaningfully the implications of evolution for how we conceive of our world and ourselves. It thus largely fails to capture what is really at stake.

The crucial thing that evolution did was erode any fundamental biological distinction between human beings and animals. But Darwin's theory and its lineage, Darwinism, also heavily contributed to the sense that this distinction was philosophically untenable as well. Darwin was determined to show—and went about doing so in *The*

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[24] In fact, the recent spike in creationist thinking has probably only helped the Darwinists to make their case, especially to those on the left. Marilynne Robinson calls creationism "the best thing that could have happened to Darwinism, the caricature of religion that has seemed to justify Darwinist contempt for the whole of religion." (Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 40)

Descent of Man—that everything that was thought of as uniquely human, whether it be language, morality, civilization, appreciation of beauty, or religion, had emerged from animals.[25] And Darwinists have followed suit, some with a very clear agenda of dismantling what they see as hubristic human exceptionalism and others who believe in the superiority of a materialist account of human consciousness and behavior. Either way, what the theory of evolution set in motion was the gradual loss of the idea that human existence has some sort of final mystery about it that cannot be accounted for, scientifically or otherwise.

The discourse surrounding evolution is complex and far-reaching, and my purpose here is not to contend with evolution scientifically, or to attempt to account for all of the many interpretations of evolution that arose both before and after Darwin. Rather, what I wish to examine is the way in which certain common interpretations of the theory of evolution either explicitly reject the idea that human beings have intrinsic worth, or else challenge this idea implicitly in their models of human behavior by assuming that human beings are fundamentally explainable in biological terms. Distinguishing between what could be called the scientific "fact" of evolution and its possible political and social implications is notoriously difficult, and accounts for much of the debate surrounding evolution.[26] Granting this difficulty, however, there is a

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[25] Janet Browne, *Darwin's Origin of Species: A Biography*, 111

[26] George Levine comments that "while one might wish to rip Darwin out of the hands of conservative politicos, it would be a mistake not to recognize that to a certain extent he has always been in those hands and that there has always been something about the Darwinian program that has invited political application, even by Darwin himself. Darwin went on record connecting human to animal biology *and* behavior. However scientific the project, there can be none more latent with ideological possibilities." (George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World,* 49)

definite tendency among many popular evolutionary thinkers to derive from the theory of evolution certain totalizing conclusions about the essence of human beings and their place within the universe, and to claim that these conclusions are the inevitable *scientific* implications of the theory itself.

One of the central questions within the evolution discourse is the extent to which science is dependent on historically contingent cultural attitudes and norms, and whether a "pure" science that restricts itself to describing objective reality and is independent from culture is even possible.[27] Though there is no final answer to this question, the discourse surrounding evolution has always been interwoven with modern humanism, as the discovery of evolution is commonly interpreted as having emptied the world of what Max Weber called "mysterious incalculable forces."[28] That human beings are the product of a long sequence of evolutionary adaptations has been taken as proof by many that there is ultimately nothing truly unique or special about human beings, and that the nature of mind, however complex it may be, is such that it can be entirely explained in terms of its biological workings. Leaving open the question of whether the theory of evolution itself is inherently problematic, many of the popular articulations of evolution that have flourished from Darwin's time until today are reflective of a larger cultural acceptance of simplistic and mechanistic accounts of human behavior as the only "true" accounts.

In this chapter I will look at two readings of evolution in terms of their metaphysical implications for thinking about human beings. According to the first reading, in which I will include Darwin's articulation of evolution, natural selection works progressively, gradually creating better and better products, so that the

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[27] Michael Ruse, *Mystery of Mysteries*: *Is Evolution a Social Construction?*, 9
[28] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* 7

development of higher consciousness and human beings can be considered inevitable. According to the second reading, natural selection works by random, favorable mutations, without any specific goal or judgments of value. The latter interpretation tends to emphasize the lack of qualitative difference between humans and animals and denies that the eventual development of human life was in any way inevitable. Both interpretations, however, show the danger of conceiving of human beings solely in biological terms, progressivism because it implies that human beings are perfectible and thus that some are less valuable than others, and anti-progressivism because it denies the complexity and uniqueness of human existence altogether. It is when evolution is privileged as an exhaustive account of human life that it leaves the realm of science and becomes a cultural construction, in conjunction with modern humanism.

It was Darwin himself who set the precedent for the idea that evolution inevitably changes, for better or for worse, our conception of human beings. In *The Descent of Man*, he writes that "the mental faculties of man and the lower animals do not differ in kind, although immensely in degree."[29] No statement perhaps encapsulates better the threat evolution poses to an idea of intrinsic human worth. If we conceive of the human mind solely in terms of biology, or even in terms of particular definable "faculties," the line between "human" and "animal" becomes all too quickly unclear, and what we think of as distinctly human attributes become meaningless biological processes. Even Darwin himself was concerned with how his theory seemed to blur this distinction. In a well-known letter to his friend, the philosopher and political economist William Graham, he summed up neatly the precariousness of an evolutionary account of mind:

[29] Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in Norton, 224

> But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?[30]

As soon as there is no longer anything about human beings that cannot be reduced to and explained by its biological origins, the human mind seems to merit doubt rather than reverence. We begin to fear that our mind is nothing more than a complex instrument of self-deception, if our deepest convictions are nothing more than elaborate products of a fundamental and all-encompassing struggle for survival.

The line of reasoning that Darwin adopted in much of his work, and the implications of which he was hinting at in his letter to Graham, became known as reductionism. In the most basic of terms, this is the idea that everything at the higher level can be fully explained in terms of the lower level. Meaning, in order to understand complex structures—the phenomena of human consciousness and behavior, for example—we can study the smaller and less complicated structures of which it is composed—like the gene—and use this observation to formulate generalized laws about how the complex structures function and operate.[31] Though Darwin never described his method as "reductionist," comments George Levine, this reasoning was implicit in his arguments:

> In a certain sense the reductionism is only an updated version of Darwin's own argument that we can understand morality as growing out of the "social instincts," the herd behavior that served to minimize the danger to groups of animals through the tendency of individual members of the group to announce, even at their own risk, the presence of predators.[32]

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[30] Darwin, *Darwin Correspondence Project*
[31] George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, 51-53
[32] Ibid., 52

While Darwin may not have intended to say that human morality *was* a herd instinct, but rather that it had originated as one, the nature of reductionist reasoning is that it collapses this difference because it posits that, in tracing the origins of something like morality, we provide a complete account of it. To say that human beings evolved from primates comes to mean that human beings *are* primates, not just in a biological sense but also in a cultural sense.

Since Darwin, many respected evolutionary biologists have resisted the reductionist line of reasoning with which evolutionary thinking has been associated. This resistance is often based on the argument that reductionism, in assuming that complex structures can be explained in terms of the smaller structures that compose it, does not look at the relationships *among* the smaller structures themselves, and thus does not account for how these relationships change the way the smaller phenomena behave. One of the strongest critics of reductionism in this respect is Richard Lewontin, who has argued that it was not an essential part of Darwin's thinking. Another critic of reductionism is the philosopher of science John Dupré, who has argued that "as objects are united into integrated wholes they acquire new properties," and that these causal properties are just as real as those at the lower level. Nonetheless, reductionism provided the grounding for the evolutionary disciplines of sociobiology, which looks at the biological basis of social behavior, and its descendent, evolutionary psychology, both of which claim status as legitimate sciences.[33]

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[33] George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, 53-57

Reductionism is also foundational to the branch of evolutionary thinking known as Darwinism. Darwinism is not synonymous with the theory of evolution, which refers to "the change in groups of organisms over time, so that descendants differ from their ancestors."[34] Rather, Darwinism is an interpretation of this phenomenon that extends beyond the science of evolution. Its meaning varies depending on context. The philosopher Michael Ruse defines it as "the claim that natural selection is the overwhelmingly significant causal factor in evolution."[35] In her essay "Darwinism," Marilynne Robinson goes farther, making a distinction between "evolution, the change the occurs in organisms over time, and Darwinism, the interpretation of this phenomenon which claims to refute religion and to imply a personal and social ethic which is, not coincidentally, antithetical to the assumptions imposed and authorized by Judeo-Christianity."[36]

Both definitions are compatible with a general characterization of Darwinism as a materialist worldview that is usually (though not always) accompanied by the following beliefs: that self-interest is the prevailing rule in human and animal relations, that the universe is not only completely intelligible but ultimately purposeless, and that knowledge and acceptance of evolution is incompatible with belief in God. Though Darwinists deny that they are concerned with anything but objective readings of natural fact, the implications of the reductionist approach they employ are manifestly

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[34] Michael Ruse, *Mystery of Mysteries*, 279

[35] Ruse defines natural selection as "the key Darwinian mechanism for evolutionary change, claiming that a small percentage of organisms in each generation survive and reproduce owing to characteristics which other members of the population do not possess; these adaptive characteristics are passed along to offspring." (Ibid., 282)

[36] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 30

metaphysical—or rather, anti-metaphysical. In proceeding according to the assumption that everything, including the human being, is no more than the sum of its parts, Darwinism takes as a given a radically devalued conception of the human being that is unique to the modern age.

Darwin's reductionist approach to thinking about human beings is an undeniable part of his work and his legacy. So, too, is the influence of progressivism on his conceptualizing of natural selection, even though the question of whether or not there is an inherent idea of progress in Darwin's work remains highly controversial. In light of the eugenics movements of the 20th century, Darwinists often seek to downplay any progressivist tendencies in Darwin's work. They argue that Social Darwinism—the idea, popularly characterized as "survival of the fittest," that human society is a competition in which the most worthy necessarily rise to the top—was a misinterpretation of what Darwin actually wrote, or else seek to dismiss the morally questionable parts of Darwin's thinking as merely products of his time and easily separable from the science itself. Philip Appleman, a recognized expert on the life and work of Charles Darwin and the editor of the Norton Critical Edition *Darwin*, remarks that while Darwin may have strayed "innocently" into an occasional analogical and unscientific discussion about the nature of human life, "others took that step knowingly and intentionally."[37] Darwin's work, Appleman and others argue, is not implicated by regrettable misinterpretations of his theory.

Despite these claims, there is a clear part of Darwin's work that describes evolution as progressing towards some sort of biological perfection. While this does not

[37] Philip Appleman, "Darwin: On Changing the Mind (2010)" in Norton, 10

implicate all of Darwin's thought, it does reveal the inherently morally problematic aspect of Darwin's theory of natural selection—an aspect that many Darwinists do not take seriously enough. Natural selection displaced a Judeo-Christian sense of theological purpose with a new idea of biological purpose, and it was this idea that lay the grounding for the rise of Social Darwinism and eugenics. While Darwin himself certainly did not advocate these programs explicitly, his theory lent itself well to them because it opened up the possibility of human perfectibility and thus of basing human worth on contingent biological traits.

The idea of biological progress shaped Darwin's theory from its conception. According to most accounts, the crucial and final piece of the theory of natural selection, that favorable variations are preserved and unfavorable variations destroyed, was inspired by Thomas Malthus' 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which Darwin read in the final months of his writing of the *Origin.* The basic thesis of the essay was that population increase would always outstrip the growth in food supply, thus causing periodic misery and famine, and that therefore all food assistance should be withheld from the poorest and weakest. In the frankest of terms, this would ensure that those who were dragging everyone else down would eventually die, bringing the food supply and the rate of population increase into favorable alignment and thereby removing a fundamental impediment to human happiness. Furthermore, the struggle for existence that this "policy" helped to encourage was necessarily an ongoing, and distinctly teleological, process.

Malthus framed the problem of population growth as a distinctly moral issue, arguing that what was needed was a complete reversal of society's current moral

standards. Poverty should henceforth be regarded as disgraceful, not cause for compassion. Writes Malthus:

> We are bound in justice and honor formally to disclaim the right of the poor to support. To this end, I should propose a regulation to be made, declaring, that no child born. . .should ever be entitled to parish assistance . . .The illegitimate infant is, comparatively speaking, of little value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place. . .[38]

Malthus stopped short of saying, as Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer would say later, that those who were to die as a result of these policies deserved to. Rather, he saw the withholding of charity as an unfortunate but necessary step in the righting of society. What Darwin did was give the idea the gloss of a scientific prescription, showing that it was ultimately nature, not man and his grim calculations, that dictated the necessity of such a struggle. "Man, like every other animal, has no doubt advanced to his present high condition through a struggle for existence consequent on his rapid multiplication," he wrote, "and if he is to advance still higher, it is to be feared that he must remain subject to a severe struggle."[39] While Malthus' ideas about population growth were prescriptions for a society that the Christian charity ethic had supposedly led astray, Darwin's competition was already at work in the natural world and in human society itself; indeed, human society owed its very existence to such unrelenting competition.

In his own work, Darwin attempted to "mitigate the force of Malthusian pitilessness," as Robert J. Richards writes, by conceiving of nature as a benevolent force.[40] In the final chapter of the *Origin of Species*, Darwin remarks, "When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is

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[38] Thomas Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 135
[39] Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in Norton, 253
[40] Robert J. Richards, "Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection and its Moral Purpose" in *The Cambridge Companion to the "Origin of Species,"* 64

not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply."[41] Whether or not this conclusion is in fact consoling certainly depends on whether one believes that vigor, health, and happiness are indeed the standards by which we determine someone's worthiness. Richards, for his part, frames his thesis that Darwin's conception of nature was inherently moral in opposition to most contemporary Darwinian scholars, who have "described Darwinian nature as mechanical, even amoral in its ruthlessness." Darwin, Richards argues, recognized that his original formulation of the theory of natural selection "carried certain consequences with which he did not wish to dispense," and in response tried to mitigate such consequences by framing evolution as progressive, controlled by "a wise selector that has the good of creatures at heart."[42] But Richards does not understand that what is ruthless about Malthusian natural selection is not that it kills with little regard for value, but that it evaluates the value of particular people and groups in the first place. He attempts to show that in Darwin's model natural selection is just rather than ruthless, but his defense ends up being reminiscent of the very ideas from which he is trying to distance Darwin: Social Darwinism and its queer idea of justice, in which the happiest and the strongest rightfully take their place in the biological chain of survival.

In Darwin's framework, the perishing of the weakest was necessary for the gradual improvement of all things. In the contemporary popular discourse, natural selection is thought to have challenged or even debunked the idea that the world is designed and purposeful. Philip Appleman sums up such a view: "Natural selection

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[41] Quoted in Robert J. Richards, "Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection and its Moral Purpose" in *The Cambridge Companion to the "Origin of Species,"* 64
[42] Ibid., 65

pictured the world in a constant process of change, but without the apparent prior intention of going anywhere in particular or of becoming anything in particular."[43] But though this may be how evolution came to be understood, the theory as Darwin wrote about it often implied general advancement. At the end of the *Origin of Species*, for example, he writes that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection."[44] And as Marilynne Robinson points out, even the title itself of Darwin's seminal work, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life,* is value-laden: "It clearly implies that whatever is is right, and—even less tenably—that whatever is is the product of raw struggle, and—still less tenably—that there is a teleology behind it all, one which favors and preserves."[45] It is not inaccurate to say that Darwin envisioned natural selection as doing the omniscient work of God, except that natural selection determined what was to be preserved according to what best endured the ceaseless struggle of existence.

That natural selection works to preserve "favored races" was not just a rhetorical turn of phrase. In his writings Darwin often spoke about higher and lower races of man, and in 1871's *The Descent of Man* he writes:

> At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes. . .will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the

[43] Philip Appleman, "Darwin: On Changing the Mind (2010)" in Norton, 14
[44] Darwin, *The Origin of Species* in Norton, 174
[45] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 44

> Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.[46]

Granted, Darwin was not arguing for the elimination of the "lower races" when he wrote these words, but rather describing what he thought to be happening. He was writing in a time in which the notion of "civilization" versus "savagery" was common, unremarkable, and framed as a moral issue. But the idea underlying these words of Darwin's, that human beings progress not only societally but biologically—and that societal, civilizational, and moral progress could, in turn, become manifest biologically—was new. Natural selection for Darwin governed not only teleologically but morally. Its workings were judgments of value. Not only was Darwin aware that natural selection as he conceived of it seemed mercilessness, he also lamented, following Malthus, that civilized society did not replicate this same merciless process of elimination, instead caring for the weak and tending to the sick.[47]

Darwin acknowledges in *The Descent of Man* that the fact human beings had evolved from lower forms would be "highly distasteful to many."[48] But he did not think that this necessarily decreased man's stature. In fact, in envisioning human beings as perfectible through the workings of natural selection, Darwin subtly offered a new way of conceiving of human worth. Though *The Descent of Man* amounts to a systematic dismantling of each human attribute as inherently sexual or animalistic in origin, Darwin

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[46] Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in Norton, 101

[47] From *The Descent of Man*: "With savages, the weak in body and mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination…Thus the weak members of society propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man." (Quoted in George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, 61)

[48] Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in Norton, 253

makes a point to acknowledge the "immense superiority" of man over the animals.[49] That he sees no conflict between these two notions was evident of the fact that he sees value as inhering in performance; indeed, his use of the term "superiority" is crucial, as it indicates that the difference between human beings and animals is a matter of degree (while "exceptional" would imply a difference in kind). At the end of the text, Darwin makes explicit how it is possible to conceive of human worth in evolutionary terms:

> Man must be excused for feeling some pride at having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale; and the fact of his having thus risen, instead of having been aboriginally placed there, may give him hope for a still higher destiny in the distant future.[50]

While the Judeo-Christian cosmology may have derived man's uniqueness and superiority from his having been created in the image of God, Darwin saw man as having won this privileged place himself, and thought he was capable of rising still higher.

The idea that our superiority was supposedly earned by us rather than given to us, and that we can find our worth in this fact, is one that has been preserved in Darwinism. Philip Appleman writes, "If we now consider ourselves special because of our highly developed, highly specialized brain, rather than because of some traditional myth—and if we choose scientific fact in preference to superstition—our place in the world nevertheless remains important to us."[51] Believing that evolution has culminated in humankind is a way of restoring meaning to human existence. And it is in one sense a compelling interpretation, if only because it recognizes the problem of finding human worth in evolution and attempts to propose a solution.

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[49] Darwin, *The Descent of Man* in Norton, 200
[50] Ibid., 254
[51] Philip Appleman, "Darwin: On Changing the Mind (2010)" in Norton, 18

If it is our hard-won and highly developed brain that affords us our worth, however, and evolution does in fact work progressively, all of the same dangers that gave rise to Social Darwinism and eugenics remain. If our worth is to be found strictly in our biology, would it not be augmented by altering and improving this biology? E.O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology and an unabashedly progressivist Darwinist, articulated such a possible scenario in his 1978 book *On Human Nature*:

> In time, much knowledge concerning the genetic foundation of social behavior will accumulate, and techniques may become available for altering gene complexes by molecular engineering and rapid selection through cloning. At the very least, slow evolutionary change will be feasible through conventional eugenics. The human species can change its own nature. What will it choose?[52]

Wilson's scenario serves as an example of where a biology-based notion of human worth might lead, and though it may seem far-fetched, his characterization of the problem is apt. If our worth lies in our biology, and evolution renders us biologically malleable, the question then becomes what parts of us we want to value—and what we want to devalue. For Wilson, there is possibility, rather than catastrophe, in such a scenario, as it restores the possibility of human freedom where otherwise it would seem to be threatened. While humans beings may be explainable in terms of, and even reducible to, our origins, we will soon reach a point in our evolutionary development where we will be able to choose our future.

The idea of progress, as Marilynne Robinson writes, always implies a judgment of value.[53] In conceiving of evolution in terms of progress, Darwin laid the grounding for such judgments of value, which we now characterize and often dismiss as Social

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[52] E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature: Revised Edition*, 208
[53] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, 29

Darwinism. These ideas were relatively simple and logical and very powerful. They are not as easy to separate from the "pure science" of evolution and natural selection as we might think. The theory of natural selection, as inspired by Malthus and articulated by Darwin, was never morally neutral or purely scientific. It was seen not just as a description of how life develops but as the sole causal explanation for life itself, and it implied that ruthless struggle is necessary for progress. Natural selection was used to justify ideological movements because it was, in its origins at least, an ideological account of reality.

With the exception of E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins, another popular Darwinist, most contemporary Darwinists have attempted to distance the theory of evolution by natural selection from any explicit notion of biological progressivism. They believe that the idea that evolution works progressively is an unscientific social construction and for the sake of "responsible" science refrain from reading into evolution in that way. They assert that we do not have the conclusion that humans are superior, only that they are different. Writes Michael Ruse, "Seeing evolution as a progressive process leading up to humankind is a human-created picture rather than a disinterested reflection of reflective reality."[54] Contemporary Darwinists are quick to point this out because they recognize that progressive Darwinism falls into dangerous territory very quickly. In addition to being motivated by the desire to keep science untainted by cultural projections, some Darwinists also aim to dismantle an idea of human exceptionalism that they believe to be a harmful religious falsehood. Instead of latching onto the progressivist aspects of Darwin's thinking, these thinkers focus on how Darwin showed that there was

[54] Michael Ruse, *Darwinism and Its Discontents*, 202

no fundamental biological difference between humans and animals. But although these neo-Darwinists are right to be wary of biological progressivism, their account of evolution casts the development of human life as a mere cosmic accident. To truly understand evolution, they argue, is to understand the insignificance of human life within the natural order.

Stephen Jay Gould is one Darwinist who rejected progressivism entirely, stressing that natural selection was only a principle of local adaptation, not of general advance or progress.[55] He was adamant about separating the science of evolution from any ideological implications, and he spent the last two decades of his career arguing against progressivism, which he thought was the major flaw of the Wilson's sociobiological program. Progressivism was in Gould's eyes a major impediment to any kind of genuine social progress; he recognized, rightly, that it could be used to justify claims about biological differences between humans, with some being held up as innately superior to others. He even wrote a book, *The Mismeasure of Man*, on the history of biological determinism in the United States, showing how such ideas are no more than "prejudice dressed up to look like science."[56]

In rejecting the progressivist reading of evolution, Gould stressed the extreme improbability of the development of human consciousness. In one of his seminal works, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, he argues that human beings arose "as a fortuitous and contingent outcome of thousands of linked events, any one of which could have occurred differently and sent history on an alternative pathway that would not have led to

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[55] Stephen Jay Gould, "The Evolution of Life on Earth" in *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould,* 209
[56] Michael Ruse, *Mystery of Mysteries,* 145

consciousness."[57] This is a scientific claim, one that poses no threat to how we conceive of human beings.[58] Indeed, that there were apparently "thousands" of instances in which human existence could have been rendered impossible, and yet was not, might seem to some—a religious believer, for example—to hint of something like inevitability. Improbability would seem, in this instance, only to add to the extraordinariness of such a course of events and the meaningfulness of its product.

Gould does not stop, however, at the descriptive claim that human beings were a cosmic accident. His grasp of the danger and pervasiveness of biological determinism has a clear influence on his rhetoric, as it leads him to emphasize not only the improbability but the insignificance of higher consciousness in the evolutionary scheme of things. In "The Evolution of Life on Earth" he calls human consciousness "but a tiny, late-arising twig on life's enormously aborescent bush."[59] His choice of words is also noticeable when he addresses, earlier in the essay, the difficulty of separating progress from evolution:

> . . .Our conventional desire to view history as progressive, and to see humans as predictably dominant, has grossly distorted our interpretation of life's pathway by falsely placing in the center of things a relatively minor phenomenon that arises only as a side consequence of a physically constrained starting point.[60]

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[57] Stephen Jay Gould, "The Evolution of Life on Earth" in *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould,* 215

[58] It is also a disputed claim. As journalist Robert Wright comments in an essay critiquing Gould, "if you really pay attention to what Gould is saying, you might start to wonder how evolution could have created anything as intricate as a human being." (Robert Wright, "The Accidental Creationist: Why Stephen Jay Gould is Bad for Evolution," 1)

[59] Gould, 220

[60] Ibid., 213-14

The "relatively minor phenomenon" to which Gould refers is, ostensibly, the development of human life. Though Gould is speaking descriptively, and often in metaphor, there is a tendency for his language to imply a judgment of value. In pushing back against the progressivist Darwinism that led to biological determinism, he adopts a rhetoric that is problematic in its own right.

Later in the same essay, Gould's aversion to the idea of progress becomes even more striking. He paraphrases Sigmund Freud's remark that great revolutions in the history of science have one feature in common: "they knock human arrogance off one pedestal after another of our previous examples of our self-importance." In this sense, Gould continues, the Darwinian revolution is incomplete, as "most of us are still unwilling to abandon the comforting view that evolution means (or at least embodies a central principle of) progress defined to render the appearance of something like human consciousness either virtually inevitable or at least predictable."[61] Though Gould is still reacting to the equation of evolution with progress, and progress with higher consciousness, here he leaves the realm of description and makes a claim as to meaning: to say that human life is an accident rather than an inevitability is to invalidate human "arrogance" and "self-importance." It is to overturn the consoling fiction that human beings are special and somehow different from nature. This idea, that the notion of specialness is ultimately only a comforting illusion, is one of the core narratives of modern humanism.

Other attempts to counter or disprove progressivism are equally problematic. In *Darwinism and Its Discontents*, Michael Ruse comments on the oft-discussed "arms

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[61] Stephen Jay Gould, "The Evolution of Life on Earth" in *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould,* 220

race" argument, which claims that evolutionary progress is possible when one line improves and another improves in tandem to keep up. Darwin thought that such competition would promote bigger brains and eventually human beings. Ruse disagrees:

> . . .Even if arms races are all-powerful and prevalent, there is no obvious reason to think that (in the animal world) they will lead to humans…brains are very expensive items to maintain. As guerilla warriors show us only too painfully today, often one can do more in war with light and relatively inexpensive weapons than with high-priced, complex equipment.[62]

Ruse ends the section with—what else?—a quote from Gould about the extreme unlikelihood of human consciousness. And like Gould, his retort to Darwinian biological progressivism is firmly planted within the Darwinist framework. He does not take up how the arms race theory envisions progress as intrinsically the product of competition with one's enemies, and what sort of ethical implications this might have. Rather, his problem with the theory is that it doesn't account for the sheer biological *inconvenience* of brains. That being said, Ruse is very concerned elsewhere with the philosophical implications of evolution and Darwinism. But when discussing the issue of progress, he too takes it as a given that humans are, as Darwin wrote, different from animals in degree but not in kind.

Such an argument is fundamentally Darwinian because it evaluates human attributes—our big, unwieldy, and unreliable brains, for instance—solely in terms of the biological advantage they confer on survival. (After all, it is only in the context of Darwinism that a statement like "brains are very expensive items to maintain" would even make sense.) And while the products of the human brain—culture, art, literature, religion, for example—may strike us as wondrous or majestic or beautiful, they are only byproducts of its true goal of keeping us alive and propagating our genes. The Darwinist

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[62] Michael Ruse, *Darwinism and Its Discontents,* 200

worldview, centered as it is on the idea of natural selection as the force that governs all, is necessarily totalizing. That which does not fit into its worldview is either discounted as anomaly or devalued via materialist explanations.

One instance in which this materialist reduction is apparent concerns the issue of altruism, which has always been a problem in Darwinism and evolutionary biology because it challenges natural selection's dictate that all living things act only in their self-interest. The term "altruism," as Marilynne Robinson notes, was originally coined by Auguste Comte, the father of positivism, who used the word *altruisme* in French to mean "a selfless devotion to the welfare of others which was to fill the place of belief in God left empty by the triumph of scientific positivism."[63] When used in everyday language, both altruism and selfishness imply an agent who can act either in accordance with their self-interest or against it, and who can be held responsible for this action.

Evolutionary biologists, in contrast, use the terms altruism and selfishness to characterize behavior purely according to cost-benefit analysis. An entity is said to be acting altruistically if it behaves in such a way as to increase another entity's chances for survival at the expense of its own, whereas selfish behavior has the opposite effect. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, the "problem" of altruism has to do with how a trait can survive if it causes the organism to behave in a way that makes it less likely to leave descendants. In this context altruism and selfishness are ostensibly divorced from their moral connotations; they are purely metaphors, helpful for the purposes of describing and understanding biological events.

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[63] Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self,* 42

Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, a major text on natural selection that applies the theory at the level of genes, relies heavily on such descriptive metaphors. He clarifies that the definitions of altruism and selfishness in this context are "*behavioral*, not subjective" and adds that he is not concerned with "the psychology of motives," meaning that he is not going to argue about whether altruistic behavior is actually the result of secret or subconscious selfish motives.[64] But Dawkins' oft-repeated disclaimer that he is only speaking in metaphor allows him to make sweeping and often provocative statements about the supposed selfishness of genes while at the same time claiming that he is speaking purely from a scientific point of view. Such "metaphors" include the assertion that "a predominant quality to be expected in a gene is ruthless selfishness,"[65] the statement that "as far as a gene is concerned, its alleles are its deadly rivals,"[66] or the particularly vivid proclamation that the gene "leaps from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends, abandoning a succession of mortal bodies before they sink in senility and death."[67]

Throughout the book, Dawkins uses language that implies some sort of agency, if not a full-fledged, deliberate maliciousness, on the part of the gene. He gives the genes consciousness and calls it metaphor so as to maintain the guise of objective science, when in fact his arguments, though he will not admit it, make moral claims about the nature of existence at all levels of life. In his article "In Defense of Selfish Genes," Dawkins, defending his work and its language, states once again that he was not interested in the

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[64] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene,* 4
[65] Ibid., 2
[66] Ibid., 40
[67] Ibid., 36

"emotional nature" of man.[68] And yet one of the most striking passages in *The Selfish Gene* reads:

> Brought up as we have been on the 'good of the species' view of evolution, we naturally think first of liars and deceivers as belonging to different species: predators, parasites, and so on. However, we must expect lies and deceit, and selfish exploitation of communication to arise whenever the interests of the genes of different individuals diverge. This will include individuals of the same species. As we shall see, we must even expect that children will deceive their parents, that husbands will cheat on wives, and that brother will lie to brother.[69]

While the passage does not refer to "human beings" by name, it does not seem unreasonable to infer that "husbands and wives" is not a description of gene or animal relationships. Again, Dawkins' description escapes its own metaphoric confines and becomes an attack on the moral nature of human beings. That we must "expect lies and deceit" whenever the interests of individuals conflict is a statement that implies a particular assumption about the way the world works and the impossibility of ethical relationships within it. In endowing material entities with agency, Dawkins dissolves human agency in the process. Selfishness becomes a general rule that the actor, who is not only not in control of their actions but unaware of this fact, is powerless to resist.

One way in which altruism has been made workable and comprehensible in the Darwinian paradigm is the introduction of the idea of group selection, which proposes that alleles—a particular form of a gene or group of genes—become fixed in a population regardless of the effects on individuals because of the benefit they confer to the group.[70] Though group selection has been rejected by most contemporary evolutionary biologists, Wilson has in recent years become one of the main champions of the theory. In *On*

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[68] Richard Dawkins, "In Defense of Selfish Genes," 556-557
[69] Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 69-70
[70] Steven Mithen, "How Fit Is E.O. Wilson's Evolution?"

Human Nature, which is one of his earlier works, he occupies a strange middle ground, seeming to equate altruism with group selection and thus acknowledging that altruism is "possible" while at the same time stating that humans are individually driven. Both of these contentions are made ostensibly as a scientist, but, more accurately, simply as an external observer. Because Wilson equates altruism with group selection, he is then able to argue, in lively prose, that altruism is the "enemy of civilization" because it encourages human beings to fight and die for their ethnic and nationalistic ties. "True selfishness," he writes, "if obedient to the other constraints of mammalian biology, is the key to a more nearly perfect social contract." [71] Like Dawkins, Wilson claims to adopt a purely scientific conception of altruism and selfishness but then uses these words to make moral claims.

Wilson's argument is at best counterintuitive and at worst ridiculous, but the perpetual tendency of Wilson to hugely overstate his case reveals two assumptions implicitly underlying his writing on altruism that must be recognized. First, by aligning altruism with group selection, Wilson and others have shown that even the most selfless behavior is done in the interest of expecting some sort of return–if not for the individual, then for the group. Writes Robinson, "It is a persistent characteristic of the school of thought called Darwinism to resist finding a biological basis for true social behavior, that is, behavior designed to exploit the benefits and satisfactions of attending to collective well-being, of valuing others irrespective of issues of survival."[72] Both Wilson and Dawkins may be intending to evaluate the question of whether altruism is biologically possible or advantageous, but what they end up doing (Wilson explicitly and Dawkins

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[71] E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature,* 157
[72] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam,* 62

implicitly) is condemning altruism as a *value* entirely ill-fitting with human nature. Dawkins may end his book by saying that it is possible that humans are the only animals capable of rebelling against the "tyranny" of genes, but he has spent an entire book constructing a framework in which self-interest dictates all and "survival machines" (humans included) exploit and deceive at every opportunity for the sake of survival.

What is most striking about the perspective being presented by both scientists, though, is the implication–or sometimes even the explicit statement–that we do not and cannot know our "real" motives, that the world of genes and traits that dictates how we act is almost entirely unknown to our conscious minds. There is a part in *On Human Nature* in which Wilson is attempting to spell out the difficulties of determining whether or not religion has a materialist basis discernable through science. One such difficulty is the deceptive nature of religiously-motivated behavior, for, as Wilson informs us, "the key learning rules and the ultimate, genetic motivation are probably hidden from the conscious mind, because religion is above all the process by which individuals are persuaded to subordinate their immediate self-interest to the interests of the group."[73] As even Wilson admits that religion often inspires behavior that seems to directly contradict his narrow framework, one possible response could be to question the usefulness—and indeed, the accuracy—of Wilson's characterization of human behavior as essentially self-interested. Instead, Wilson declares that it is our interpretation of the behavior as altruistic that is wrong, that the actual and necessarily biological motives are concealed from us but are nonetheless extremely powerful and present. Meaning: the behavior contradicts the theory, so the behavior must be false.

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[73] E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature,* 176

Such self-serving logic only serves to point to the fact that altruism only becomes a "problem" that must be explained when we stop taking seriously human justifications for actions as explained by the actors themselves. Darwinism does not only show the evolutionary origins and biological causes of human traits and behaviors, but posits that the secrets of the human mind lie in these programmed predispositions. This assumption, that human beings can be not only described but understood in biological terms, is not just a small subset of evolutionary thinking. Both sociobiology and evolutionary psychology rely heavily on this idea and, as George Levine observes, "continue to develop a single strain of Darwinian thought, which, though it has been present from the start, is fundamentally mechanistic, assumes the absolute primacy of empirical and rational choice, and moves if not toward biological determinism at least to a view that all the aspects of human behavior can be largely explained by biology."[74]

Evolution, when it is regarded as the primary means of understanding human existence, becomes a means for making claims about value. Darwin and the progressivist Darwinists adopt this lens explicitly, conceiving of human existence as the culmination of evolutionary development while allowing for the possibility of further biological improvement. But even the more careful Darwinists, like Ruse and Gould, proceed according to a framework in which human existence is evaluated in biological terms, as Gould casts the development of higher consciousness as an insignificant cosmic accident and Ruse addresses human attributes according to how useful they are for biological development. In the Darwinist account of evolution, the theory of natural selection becomes the key to understanding human life, providing a totalizing framework

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[74] George Levine, *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-Enchantment of the World,* 57

according to which all aspects of human behavior, even altruism, can be evaluated and explained. But as Robinson writes, human beings, whatever evil they may do, have a "singular dignity as creatures who can act freely, outside the tedious limits of our own interests."[75] In conceiving of all action as finally reducible to self-interest, Darwinism thus discounts the very capability that distinguishes human beings from animals.

Richard Dawkins begins his book *The Blind Watchmaker* with the provocation, "This book is written in the conviction that our own existence once presented the greatest of all mysteries, but it is a mystery no longer because it is solved. Darwin and Wallace solved it."[76] Though few would be as bold as to use those words exactly, this is the implicit claim of Darwinism: that evolution provided a final explanation for human beings on the earth, thus displacing human existence as a subject of inquiry or contemplation. While we may wonder at the complexity of the human being, this complexity is still finally reducible to evolutionarily developed matter that does not reflect any sort of meaning or purpose, nor does mind have access to any sort of larger reality. Though Darwinists like Dawkins may not acknowledge it, these are metaphysical claims, not the indisputable teachings of evolution. And as metaphysical claims, they rest on a reductive understanding of the universe that circumscribes, rather than furthers, any meaningful understanding of the place of human beings within it.

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[75] Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam,* 26
[76] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker,* xiii

III. Recognizing the Crisis: Rowan Williams and Hannah Arendt

Today Darwinism has become almost synonymous with modern humanism. Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Dawkins, and E.O. Wilson are all past recipients of the Humanist of the Year award, which is given by the American Humanist Association to "recognize a person of national or international reputation who, through the application of humanist values, has made a significant contribution to the improvement of the human condition."[77] The modern humanist worldview has become popularized through the work of these thinkers—particularly Wilson and Dawkins—and they have come to play key roles in the contemporary debate about whether science and religion are intrinsically at odds. To some extent, it is through this debate that modern humanism has played out, with both sides putting forward reductive understandings of both science and religion.

In this chapter I will look at two thinkers, one secular and one theological, who have risen above this debate and recognized the real issue at hand: the question of whether we can preserve an idea of human dignity in a secular age. The first thinker is Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who has thought extensively about secularism and the role of religion in the contemporary world. The second thinker is the twentieth century political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who recognized how modern science was coming to redefine the human condition and alienate human beings from the world. Despite the vast differences between their respective discourses—Christian theology, in the case of Williams, and political philosophy, in the case of Arendt—both Williams and Arendt recognized the crisis of humanism and attempted to re-envision an understanding of human dignity for the contemporary world.

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[77] "Humanists of the Year," Website of the American Humanist Association

Both Williams and Arendt recognize the need for some sort of language of transcendence to describe human beings. For Williams, however, this language is necessarily religious rather than political in character. He argues that it is only a religious concept of the person, with its recognition of the inalienable dignity of human beings based on their shared relationship with God, that can ground and richen a secular politics. The last lines of Williams' essay "Secularism, Faith, and Freedom" in *Faith in the Public Square* encapsulate his sense of the necessity of religion in today's world:

> The struggle for a right balance of secular process and public religious debate is part of a wider struggle for a concept of the personal that is appropriately robust and able to withstand the pressures of a functionalist and reductionist climate. . .without this dimension, the liberal ideal becomes deeply anti-humanist. And, like it or not, we need a theology to arrest this degeneration.[78]

In Williams' understanding, secularism as it has been achieved fluctuates between two models: procedural secularism, in which the state oversees a variety of religious communities but does not privilege any one group or system over another; and programmatic secularism, in which religious faith must be entirely confined to the private sphere and subordinated to one's loyalty to the state. Though it is the latter type of secularism that Williams takes issue with, he is also contesting the virtue of what could be called the character of the secular, which proceeds from the assumption that decisions and attitudes pertaining to life in the public realm cannot be determined by factors that reference any presence or agency beyond the tangible.[79] The first problem with this assumption, Williams suggests, is that it rules out of public discourse what for many people are their strongest motivations and deepest convictions. To the extent that these

[78] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 36
[79] Ibid., 12

convictions are expressed, they must be removed from the religious context that often gives evaluative or moral language its weight.

The second problem with the secularist ideal, in which public life is emptied of all references to the non-tangible, is that it results in a kind of functionalism where the social sphere is evaluated according to how successful everyone is in achieving their aims without harming others. Although the secular society rarely operates quite so neatly in reality, the predominant understanding of secularism nonetheless implies "that the definitive 'currency' of the public realm is to do with calculation about functions: I or we begin with the aims that we are out to realize; the other participants in the social or public process are understood in terms of how they further or obstruct those aims." The opposite of secularism, Williams writes, would therefore be "the resolve to regard the environment, human and non-human, as more than instrumental."[80] By making religious faith an entirely private matter, necessarily separate from one's role as a citizen, we deprive public life of non-instrumental perspectives that regard societal relations as more than just contests of power and assertions of will.

The relationship between secular modernity and modern religion is made more complex, however, by the fact that religion itself has assimilated to the secular framework and even reinforced it in the form of fundamentalism. In our times, religious faith is often understood as a matter of affirming propositions that determine what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. This emphasis on propositional faith shows how religious utterance itself has been enfolded into the functionalist or instrumentalist framework; its purpose is no longer to reflect upon meaning or to shape how self and

[80] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 13

world are sensed but to solve problems and make prescriptions. Secularized religion is also representative for Williams of a reemerging urge within Christian history to understand God's seeing and knowing of the world as a "maximal accumulating of information," a single and absolute vantage point from which historical closure can be claimed.[81] Following from this understanding is the assumption that the will of God can then be known, understood, and prescribed. Secularized religion, Williams writes, thus ceases "to give priority to the sense that God's seeing of the world and the self is very strictly incommensurable with any specific human perspective, and is in danger of evacuating religious language of the pressure to take time to learn its meaning."[82] This type of faith, which he calls "forgetful religion," becomes translated during the Enlightenment into worldly terms and enfolded within secularism as the idea that there is "a 'seeing' of the world from some vantage point within it that leaves no room for any seeing from elsewhere."[83]

Along with the supposition that there is a final seeing and knowing of the world that exhausts all others, the character of the secular is also inseparable from liberal individualism, embodied for Williams in the thinking of Isaiah Berlin and the counter-Enlightenment thinkers he was concerned with. In *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Berlin makes a distinction between positive liberty, which arises in a society where government attempts to promote a particular agenda on the basis of certain ideas about what a free individual looks like, and negative liberty, where government allows a maximum level of

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[81] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 18
[82] Ibid., 6
[83] Ibid., 15

individual choice and does not attempt to set moral priorities for society.[84] Berlin rejected positive liberty on the basis of his belief that a government that seeks to enact a positive project is always in danger of becoming totalitarian—by presuming that there is a universal rationality that can be recognized and taught, there is always the potential that the state will attempt to seek out and destroy the "irrational" elements of society. However, the principle of negative liberty that Berlin proposes instead is equally problematic in that it ends up foregoing the possibility of social unity entirely, asserting that a society in which individual rights are observed is the best that can be hoped for. If a society predicated on enlightenment rationality is too politically dangerous, the society modeled on Berlin's liberal realism risks reducing the human person "to an economic unit, a solitary accumulator of rights, comforts and securities."[85] It leads, finally, to a simplified understanding of political freedom, predicated on the assumption that all social relations can be understood as contests of power between atomized individuals.

This notion of power as the lens through which all human action can be finally evaluated demonstrates the inherent corruptibility of the liberal secularist ideal. In his introduction to a book of compiled essays entitled *Theology and the Political,* Williams comments on the "implicit nihilism" in the idea that meaningful action can be reduced to successful assertion of the individual will on the external world—a nihilism that hides in many modern and postmodern philosophies, theologies, and social projects. "To the extent that popular liberal and pluralist thought assumes with blithe unawareness a basic model of meaningful action in terms of assertion," he remarks, "it assumes a final social

[84] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 21
[85] Ibid., 36

unintelligibility, an ultimate inability to make sense of each other's actions."[86] Christianity rejects this defining of action in terms of assertion, offering instead a notion of meaningful action as that which foregoes the assertion of will and power and in doing so contributes to a system of communication. The most radical and revisionary example of such action, action as testimony, is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.[87]

In opposition to the instrumentalist and individualist character of secularism, Williams argues for the indispensability of the "non-secular," a sort of "imaginative awareness" that acknowledges in all moments the possibility of other perspectives, other ways of seeing the world. The non-secular, he writes, "is, foundationally, a willingness to see things or other persons as the objects of another sensibility than my own, perhaps another sensibility than *our* own…The point is that what I am aware of, I am aware of in significant dimensions not defined by my awareness."[88] To be aware in this sense is to affirm that the human and non-human world always eludes a final explanation or objective account, to strive to see all things "in the light of someone's (actual or possible) love."[89] In terms of the state, this sort of awareness translates into the acceptance that it does not hold a totalized authority over all aspects of life, that its power is not the only or the ultimate sanction, and that the public good is not only a matter of balancing self-interest and negotiating practical goods. When Williams talks about the necessity of the non-secular in the political realm, he does not mean that the state should endorse religious doctrine or align itself with one religious perspective. He means, rather, that the state should be willing to promote debate about public policies not only in terms of how

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[86] Williams, Introduction to *Theology and the Political,* 2
[87] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 2-3
[88] Ibid., 13
[89] Ibid., 18

they serve particular ends, but also in terms of what sort of society they foster and what kind of human agent they nurture. What is lacking in the liberal political culture is "some picture of human flourishing that is not reducible to a fairly peaceful adjustment of competing individual needs."[90]

At the core of this idea of the non-secular is a conception of the human person that transcends both the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment paradigms. Williams recognizes that we cannot define human beings in terms of capacities, whether rational or moral, because such definitions risk excluding particular people or groups that are deemed to not fit these conditions. Nor can we think of human beings solely in terms of their individual needs and desires, as disconnected parts of a society inevitably ruled by conflicts of interest. In other words, what is needed is a conception of human dignity that reflects the sense of belonging that gives meaning to human life, the way in which human identity is always contingent upon membership within a community.

Williams writes that in order to ground human dignity, "something more than biology is required, some imagined community of universal *recognition*; and that is what faith proposes, in various forms, but always steering us towards the realization that we are recognizable to each other because we are first recognized (affirmed, valued, loved) by God."[91] As soon as we recognize the fact of human responsibility, the way in which each person not only belongs to and is seen by a community but is ultimately answerable to this community in some fundamental way, we are implicitly acknowledging the sense of being given something by another—that "something is bestowed which both enables

[90] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 119
[91] Ibid., 123

and requires an answer."[92] It is not possible, Williams argues, to speak about nor fully acknowledge this act of bestowal without suggesting some sort of "initiating agency" that is independent of our world.[93] Human dignity thus becomes, in a Christian conception, grounded in what Williams refers to as the "not chosen dimension of our reality," the way in which God has already bestowed upon us and taken responsibility for our lives.[94]

This idea of human selfhood as constituted by God's ontologically prior seeing of the world is crucial for thinking about human rights, as it implies that there is a level of human selfhood that can never be made subject to another person's will, or to a human system of power. According to Williams, the impossibility of absolute control or ultimate ownership of human beings is evident from the way Christianity conceives of the human body. In his essay "Do Human Rights Exist?" Williams discusses the New Testament's brief treatment of the topic of slavery, arguing that the baptismal relationship is understood as severely complicating the slave-owner's relationship to the slave. "The slave is no longer simply the property of the master or mistress," he writes, "but 'belongs' to the one divine Master and is ultimately answerable to him, in exactly the same way as is the Christian slave-owner."[95] While the idea that the master had no power over the *mind* of the slave was made commonplace by Stoic writers such as Seneca, Christian doctrine suggests that not only the mind but the body are incapable of being owned by another person—not because I have an ultimate ownership over my body, but because "the whole idea of ownership is inappropriate."[96] The body, at least in the

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[92] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 9
[93] Ibid., 158
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 151
[96] Ibid., 152

tradition of Thomas Aquinas, is not strictly separable from the soul; it is the means of subjectivity and communication that enables one a place within human discourse. Williams goes on to suggest that a Christian conception of human rights would recognize the human body as the locus of human identity, selfhood, and communication.

This idea of the "not chosen" is for Williams the only way of conceiving of human dignity in a way that is non-negotiable. To acknowledge the inalienable dignity of another person, he writes, is "to admit that there is something about them that is, so to speak, *beyond me*: something to which my individual purposes, preferences, fears, or hopes, are irrelevant."[97] It is to recognize their standing before their maker, a standing that is always "completely unaffected by any particular way in which things turn out in the history of the world."[98] There is no possibility of human action bringing about a final or optimal state of affairs, and likewise no possibility of human perfectibility. But neither is it the case that we can declare human fallibility to be the ultimate rule of human relations and achievement. In the Abrahamic religions, there *is* a final state of affairs which we can apprehend if not achieve absolutely, an eschatological point of reference. Although human beings cannot anticipate the judgment of God, they can practice commitment to the welfare of others. The fact that God recognizes and loves us allows us to trust that mutual recognition and love among human beings is possible, that human relations transcend power dynamics.

Though Hannah Arendt was a secular thinker, Williams' idea of the "not chosen" is reminiscent of what she calls in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* the "mysterious

[97] Williams, *Faith in the Public Square,* 171
[98] Ibid., 122

background of mere givenness."[99] An integral, and oft-overlooked, concept in her philosophy, givenness is that which precedes our belonging to a world; it is that which we cannot change about ourselves and that makes us unique and different from others. Although Arendt believes contribution to the human artifice and participation in the public realm to be essential to human life, her conception of man as a necessarily political being arises directly from her idea of the "givenness" of man, how he exists simply by virtue of being born into the world. Each person is the result of their actions and speech in the public realm, but they are also their natural, unchangeable characteristics that come from nature, including their immutable finitude.

Arendt believed that the desire to escape this mysterious condition of givenness was a desire unique to the modern world, and she thought that this rebellion against what is given and unchangeable about human existence was changing the human condition itself. One of the key passages where Arendt talks about givenness is in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when she is discussing the loss of human rights:

> The more highly developed a civilization, the more accomplished the world it has produced, the more at home men feel within the human artifice - the more they will resent everything they have not produced, everything that is merely and mysteriously given them. . .This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable grace of love, which says with Augustine, 'Volo ut sis (I want you to be),' without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.

For both Arendt and Williams, the recognition of the not chosen, or the given, is the root of gratitude, an affirmation that anchors human existence. But Arendt also recognizes the implicit danger that accompanies givenness in the modern age, the way in which it

[99] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 301

represents both the essence of what it means to be human and the bareness of mere existence. Man now wants to deny his dark background of givenness because it reminds him of the limits to his power, and thus becomes an infuriating obstacle in his bid for total domination of his world. She later develops this idea in the preface to *The Human Condition,* in which she observes twentieth century man's terrifying rebellion against existence as it has been given to him; soon, she predicts, man may be possessed by a wish "to exchange this gift for something he has made himself."[100] Man may soon be at the mercy of his own abilities, eventually conceiving of his own givenness as a handicap to be defeated and nature as an obstruction to the power that he is able to assert unfailingly in all other aspects of life.

Though givenness is what enables the condition of plurality, Arendt believed that to be truly human each individual must seek to transcend his mere givenness and act and speak within the public realm. Indeed, her idea of the right to have rights, which means the right "to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions," is directly related to the inherent publicness of individuals.[101] Each individual, finding themselves in a plurality with others, must leave the private realm and engage in the public realm, the realm of appearance and the sphere in which human beings act in concert as equals. While human dignity is intrinsically related to givenness in Arendt's conceptions, rights are contingent upon belonging to a community. "Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his

[100] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 2-3
[101] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 297

human dignity," writes Arendt in the *Origins.* "Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity."[102]

Unlike Williams, Arendt did not think that Christian faith, or religion in general, could ground this essential belonging to a political community in the modern age; she thought that the rise of Christianity had, along with the Socratic elevation of theoretical contemplation over political engagement, displaced man from the inherently shared world. Christianity elevated citizenship within the kingdom of God over worldly political citizenship; it envisioned the world as only a provisional home for human beings. Secularism had then further divorced human beings from the world, rather than bringing them back to it. Writes Arendt in *The Human Condition*:

> Whatever the word 'secular' is meant to signify in current usage, historically it cannot possibly be equated with worldliness; modern man at any rate did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself.[103]

For Arendt, the loss of faith that characterized the modern age was not religious in origin, nor did it only affect religious belief. Rather, it was part of a profound and far-reaching philosophical shift in the way human experience was perceived—"an attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself."[104]

That human beings had gained a deep interiority but lost the common world was part of what constituted, for Arendt, the crisis of humanism and the loss of an idea of

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[102] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* 297
[103] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 320
[104] Ibid., 254

humanity. Her work traced the genealogy of this loss; it also was, in essence, a response to it, an argument for why we must hold onto a sense of the exceptionality of human beings. She believed that without a sense of the dignity and uniqueness of human beings, there is nothing stopping us from destroying human life whenever necessity or ideology seem to demand it. For Arendt what makes human beings unique is that we can build a world that outlasts us, a world in which we can speak and act, be seen and be heard. Thus, one manifestation of the crisis of humanism and the loss of human exceptionalism was what Arendt called earth and world alienation, that is, the erosion of that which makes the world into a shared home for human beings.

The concept of world in Arendt's philosophy refers to the artifice that humans erect and dwell in upon the earth. For Arendt the world is not only the tangible product of human hands over many generations, but also the collective sense of reality amongst human beings that endures over time. When human beings actively belong to the common world they are devoted to its preservation and care, dedicated to the well-being of the whole over one's private concerns. To be alienated from the world is thus to be alienated from this process of self-transcendence by which human beings find their place within a human community. In *The Human Condition* Arendt discusses three major events that contributed to the world alienation of the modern age: the discovery of America and the subsequent exploration and surveying of the entire earth, the expropriation of ecclesiastical property during the Protestant Reformation, and the invention of the telescope, the advent of modern science.[105]

[105] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 248

The first of these events—the exploration and mapping of the earth, beginning with the European discovery of the New World—contributed to world alienation in that it required the explorer or surveyor to inhabit a detached vantage point divorced from his immediate surroundings. Writes Arendt, "It is in the nature of the human surveying capacity that it can function only if man disentangles himself from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraws himself to a distance from everything near him."[106] Such a perspective, like the view from an airplane window, provokes a remarkable shift in perception. At such a distance, a sense of the particularities of human life begins to recede. The human world appears no longer as an indelible and meaningful reality; instead, it resembles the work of insects against an immense landscape.

Although the cartographer's perspective is not in itself intrinsically harmful, it foreshadows how the perspective of the disengaged and dispassionate observer threatens to diminish the significance of what is being observed. As Michael H. McCarthy points out in *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt*, "if human beings and events are judged politically by the way they appear, then the standpoint of the earthly mapmaker is fundamentally anti-political. For there is nothing in the appearances granted from on high to indicate the dignity and importance of what he observes."[107] The voyages of exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries metaphorically shrink the earth, enabling human beings to grasp its scale and take possession of its landscape in a new and profound way. But their discoveries also enable simultaneously a detachment from the earth, a metaphorical distancing from the immediate reality of the world.

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[106] Ibid., 251
[107] Michael J. McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt,* 84

The second world-alienating event that Arendt names is the expropriation of church and peasant property during the Protestant Reformation. The significance of this event for Arendt lay in her belief in the importance, even the sacredness, of private property. In order to freely enter the public realm and engage with the world, human beings need a "privately owned share in the world," a place to retreat to that is not subject to the gaze and demands of the public sphere."[108] The deprivation of certain groups of their property thus deprived them of their tangible place in the world and was one of the main factors that contributed to the collapse of the separation between the public and private realms.

For Arendt, the devaluing of private property, evident in the expropriation of peasant land and the subsequent breakdown of the feudal system, was the beginning of the modern culture of consumption. The impact of this event, she writes, "propelled Western mankind into a development in which all property was destroyed in the process of its appropriation, all things devoured in the process of their production, and the stability of the world undermined in a constant process of change."[109] The modern capitalist economy that arose following the Protestant Reformation was made possible only through a new impetus towards unceasing accumulation of wealth and unlimited material production. In this new system, things are made in order to be consumed and used up rather than to serve as lasting contributions to the human artifice. The worldly ideal of conservation is lost to an endless cycle of production, in which "the evaluative priority has clearly shifted from the objective worth of the thing made to the relentless

[108] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 257
[109] Ibid., 252

expansion of the thing itself."[110] Human beings in the modern age become alienated from the world because they are no longer invested in its preservation; indeed, the very functioning of the economic system requires the destruction of worldly objects.

The third and most significant event of world alienation—and, for Arendt, the decisive event of the modern age—was the invention of the telescope. She observes in *The Human Condition* that it was Galileo who actually proved what Descartes only articulated: that our senses, "our very organs for the reception of reality," cannot be trusted to tell us anything true about the world.[111] The fact that the telescope could show us that which our senses could not meant that our senses should be displaced as our primary means of learning about the world. It became understood that what our senses tell us is, if not outright wrong, at least not as valuable as what can be learned from the instruments we create. Although mathematicians as well as philosophers had challenged the geocentric model prior to Galileo's discovery, Galileo was the first to "put within the grasp of an earth-bound creature and its body-bound senses what had seemed forever beyond his reach, at best open to the uncertainties of speculation and imagination."[112] Once our worldly senses are no longer the means of perceiving what is 'real', we begin to wish for a point in the universe outside the earth—the "Archimedean point"—from which to view and handle nature.

Arendt thought that the invention of the telescope marked the beginning of the separation of human beings from the earth, and of modern science from humanity and human concerns. The cartographer's position of detachment from his surroundings

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[110] McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt,* 85
[111] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 262
[112] Ibid., 260

became radicalized in a new and "universal" science of nature that always regards earthly existence as relative and earthly perspective as untrustworthy. This universal science is used not only to master nature, which had been possible before, but to import "cosmic processes into nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her, and, with her, man's mastership over her."[113] In fact, modern science derives its very integrity from this "carelessness" that subordinates all other concerns—the place of man and the earth in the universe for example, or the very survival of mankind itself—to its primary task, the search for objectivity and truth.[114]

As McCarthy observes, part of what makes modern science's aspiration towards an absolute knowledge of the universe so threatening for Arendt is that it cannot remained confined within the boundaries of science, but instead begins to influence and shape the realm of politics as well. But the perspective of the citizen, unlike that of the scientist, is always "intrinsically limited." Each citizen seeks to overcome this limitation not by ascending to an objective standpoint and rejecting the world as it appears to him or her, but by freely exchanging opinions with other citizens. The scientific valuing of absolute knowledge, its rejection of the citizen's relative standpoint, thus endangers the plurality of perspectives upon which politics depends.[115] Galileo's theory of knowledge, when applied to the political realm, becomes a totalizing ideology, proposing that there is one perspective that exhausts all others and renders dialogue unnecessary or futile.

If Galileo's invention of the telescope marked the crucial turning point in the development of modern science, then Descartes offered the modern philosophical

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[113] Ibid., 268
[114] Arendt, "The Conquest of Space," 48
[115] McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt,* 88

response to this discovery, as he conceptualized the scientific doubt of the senses as a principle pertaining to all human perception. Although Descartes, unlike Galileo, retreated into subjectivism rather than seek objectivity, his thought proceeded from the same starting point: that what appears to our earthly selves and human faculties is ultimately a deception. The fundamental doubt thus completely eclipsed the old philosophical opposition between sensual and rational truth, for it was grounded in the belief that truth and reality do not actually show themselves to human beings at all. The pervasive idea of pagan, Hebrew, and Christian antiquity—that Being opens itself to human beings and that we are able to receive and understand it—was lost, only to be replaced by a radical doubting of reality that assumes that it is only through doing away with appearances entirely that we can hope to discover true knowledge.[116]

Once doubt becomes the only thing of which one can be certain, any contemplation of the external world becomes fundamentally a confrontation with oneself. Human beings no longer have a world in common because their perceptual awareness of it is always suspect; what we apprehend no longer reflects upon the qualities of the world but upon the structure of our minds. In Descartes' account of human consciousness, "each finite subject is confined to a private space of appearances from whose objective contents all other persons are excluded."[117] The detached and anti-political perspective of the scientific observer thus finds its parallel within the Cartesian disembodied ego, which exists in a state of perpetually private awareness, utterly deprived of a common world shared with other human beings.

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[116] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 274-6
[117] McCarthy, *The Political Humanism of Hannah Arendt,* 90

What is decided with the rise of modern science and philosophy is that our minds as they were given to us do not have access to anything larger than ourselves. There is no sense that human beings are privileged in their relation to the world or that we fit in some essential way into the world that we live in. Rather, the fact that the universe is intelligible to human beings means only that we are creatures who happen to be able to recognize patterns and speculate as to their meaning. Whereas modern science makes the empirical world the ultimate point of reference while choosing to set aside the mind—or, through mathematics, passes over appearance entirely and becomes "the science of the structure of the human mind"—the Cartesian solution is to make the mind the point of reference rather than the world.[118] But both modern science and philosophy only arrive at a certainty of reality by cutting off human beings from transcendence into a world.

Arendt is much more explicit about what the phenomenon of world alienation looks like and the challenges it presents than she is about a possible means of resisting this alienation. Indeed, she does not state clearly that such resistance is even possible, although she is adamantly opposed to the idea that we can go back to any pre-modern mentality. But her philosophy as a whole is a subtle but firm rejection of the idea that hopelessness is the only adequate response to human estrangement from the world. Although one would be mistaken to think of Arendt as proposing a definite project, one can nonetheless see in her thought a sense of a possible way forward, a potential means of combatting the reductive and totalizing spirit of our time. One place in which this sense of hope or faith is discernible is in her essay "The Crisis of Culture", when she discusses the genealogy and meaning of classical humanism.

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[118] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 266

In a general sense, Arendt writes, the Roman *humanitas* named the belief in "the integrity of the person as person."[119] It was an idea at odds with the sentiment expressed in the Roman commonplace, *Amicus Socrates, amicus Plato, sed magis aestimanda veritas*, or, "Socrates is dear to me, Plato is dear to me, but the truth is dearer still." This statement of Cicero's seems to suggest that friendship and human worth should be sacrificed to pursuit of the absolute truth. But there is another saying, Arendt points out, in which Cicero rejects this idea: *Errare mehercule malo cum Platone…quam cua istis (sc. Pythagoraeis) vera sentire*, or "I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato rather than hold true views with his opponents." Arendt's interpretation of this saying belies a deeper meaning of *humanitas*, in which the word connotes an active choosing of the world over absolute truth:

> What Cicero in fact says is that for the true humanist neither the verities of the scientist nor the truth of the philosopher nor the beauty of the artist can be absolutes; the humanist, because he is not a specialist, exerts a faculty of judgment and taste which is beyond the coercion which each specialty imposes upon us. This Roman *humanitas* applied to men who were free in every respect, for whom the question of freedom, of not being coerced, was the decisive one—even in philosophy, even in science, even in the arts. Cicero says: In what concerns my association with men and things, I refuse to be coerced by truth, even by beauty.[120]

Humanism in this sense belies the understanding that the pursuit of truth becomes hollow as soon as it forsakes the world. It is the rejection of the closed secular vantage point, in the language of Williams, or the Archimedean point, in the language of Arendt. The truly humanistic attitude is thus one that, in the free exercise of judgment and taste, cares for and takes care of the things of the world and, through this caring, cultivates a love for the world itself. Humanism is not only a sense of the intrinsic worth of human beings, but

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[119] Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture" in *Beyond Past and Future,* 224
[120] Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture," 225

also the sense that to be human is to always be engaged with and responsible to the world.

IV. The Humanism of Marilynne Robinson

We have not escaped, nor have we in any sense diminished, the mystery of our existence. We have only rejected any language that would seem to acknowledge it.
–Marilynne Robinson, "Cosmology"

Few contemporary thinkers are as outspoken in their opposition to the modern reduction of human beings to knowable entities as the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson. Implicit in this reductionism for Robinson is the belief, arising out of positivism, that we exist within a narrow reality that can be exhaustively described and explained. Because this model is made possible only through excluding those structures of meaning that cannot be grasped through reason, we have come to devalue the very testimony that would call it into question, namely, the felt experience of consciousness, of subjectivity and intuition. As a result, the human mind is no longer thought to be able to see anything truly or to open unto a larger reality. In our desire for certainty, we have lost the sense of ourselves as essential parts of an infinitely complex order, an order that we can never fully understand but in which we nonetheless participate.

Robinson considers this closed ontological model to be the corollary of the positivist rejection of the Western metaphysical and religious traditions. She observes in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of the Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* that positivism proceeded from two fundamental assumptions, both of which have remained largely unchallenged: that science has given us the ability to answer certain essential questions about the nature of reality and that, as a result, we must exclude from our model of reality whatever science cannot verify or falsify. These assumptions are in large part responsible for the accepted notion that there is an intrinsic conflict between science

and religion, for religion, so the debate goes, tries to account for phenomena that are now coming under the purview of science.[121] Robinson argues, in response, that this controversy is founded upon a drastically simplified conception of religion and an outdated conception of science that bears more in common with the word as it was understood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than with modern physics and cosmology.[122] Science is portrayed within the frame of this debate as a way of conquering mystery, rather than exploring and grappling with it.

In some sense, this truncated debate has come to stand in for the real conflict at hand, which is between two radically different approaches to thinking about reality and human consciousness. Observes Robinson:

> The great breach that separates the modern Western world from its dominant traditions of religion and metaphysics is the prestige of opinion that throws into question the scale of the reality in which the mind participates. Does it open on ultimate truth, at least potentially or in momentary glimpses, or is it an extravagance of nature, brilliantly complex yet created and radically constrained by its biology and by cultural influence?[123]

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[121] The recent comments of Jim Al-Khalili, the president of the British Humanist Association, serve as one of countless examples of this sentiment. Writes Al-Khalili in *New Statesman*: "As a scientist, I have an unshakeable rationalist conviction that our universe is comprehensible; that mysteries are mysteries only because we have yet to figure them out. There is no need for a supernatural being to occupy the gaps in our understanding, because we will eventually fill them with new knowledge based on objective scientific truths: answers that are not based on mythologies, or cultural/historical whims, or personal biases, but arrived at by examining hypotheses, testing our theories to destruction and being prepared to abandon them if they conflict with empirical data." He goes on to say that atheists could afford to be a little less militant and outspoken in their opposition to religion, for "we are winning the argument." (Jim Al-Khalil, "Believing in a God Is Fine By Me", *New Statesman*, March 27, 2013.)

[122] Robinson, *Absence of Mind*, ix-x

[123] Ibid., 31

In the reductionist scientific understanding, we exist within an objective reality that is knowable to us as a set of facts; we do participate in this reality in the sense that we can study it empirically. But reality as it was conceived in the religious and metaphysical traditions is more than an ever-growing set of facts, more than an amalgamation of natural processes and laws. It does not necessarily lend itself to being verified or disproved, as it cannot be fully encapsulated in empirical terms. While empirical observation and instrumental reasoning do offer one kind of knowledge, these ways of looking at the world are inherently limited in what they are able to disclose. In conceiving of knowledge solely in these terms, modern thought has adopted a narrow understanding of reality that severely limits the role of human beings within it. It has forced out the fundamental human experience of intuition, the type of "knowing" by which we grasp our place within a larger reality. That one "feels" oneself to be a part of this reality alerts us to its existence, even if individuals articulate it in completely different ways, even if its true essence can never be known.

One of the framing narratives of the reductionist model is that science liberates humanity from the constraints of religion, replacing illusion with empirical fact. But this model actually replaces what it dismisses as religious illusion with its own assumptions about the nature of existence. Robinson writes, "To say there is no aspect of being that metaphysics can meaningfully address is a metaphysical statement."[124] Any claim about ultimate reality extends beyond what we can know solely through reason—even if that claim is that there is nothing to be known that cannot be known through reason. Thus, the real conflict is not between science and religion but between an understanding of reality

[124] *Absence of Mind,* 34

that preserves mystery and an understanding of reality that implies that mystery can be dispelled and conquered. In one understanding, the mind is "properly an object of wonder," sufficient unto itself, indicative of the special status of human beings within the framework of the universe.[125] In the other, the mind is a myth that is gradually being debunked, a relic of a concept that belongs to a time when we could not study the brain and learn how it worked.

The idea that science could "disprove" religion or render the questioning it inspires unnecessary or irrelevant is one of the biggest fallacies underlying the perceived dichotomy between science and religion. That science, because it furthers our empirical knowledge of the world, has a privileged position over religion when it comes to making claims about ultimate meaning is a belief that has flourished because we have come to equate description with explanation. But being able to describe something does not necessarily give any insight into the purpose or intention behind the thing described.[126] "If the mind is the activity of the brain," Robinson writes, "this means only that the brain is capable of such lofty and astonishing things that their expression has been given the names mind, and soul, and spirit."[127] The purpose of the brain or the meaning of the mind remains an overwhelming question, an untouched mystery, even as we learn more about the brain from a biological standpoint. Contrary to the pro-science argument, religion has not flourished for thousands of years because it helps us to dispel mystery, but because it is a way of grappling with the fact of mystery itself.

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[125] "Cosmology," 58
[126] Ibid., 61
[127] *Absence of Mind,* 112

For Robinson, wonder and awe at the unknowabilility of the universe, and an acknowledgement of the infinite richness and meaningfulness of that which cannot be known, is the essence of a religious frame of perception. Religion rejects the idea that we can arrive rationally at an account of our reality, or even that we can make a definitive assertion as to the existence of God. We have no basis in our experience for such a claim, as "we have no way of knowing the true nature of the reality in which we are immersed, of the substance of which we are composed."[128] Religious belief is thus not a matter of affirming particular propositions about the universe. It resides, rather, in the assumptions that life, whatever its ultimate meaning, has a profound significance, and that human beings fit into the universe in a miraculous if endlessly mysterious way. Robinson remarked in an interview that "the feeling of amazement that I think is appropriate to an alerted sense of what being is leads very naturally to deep comfort with the assumption of God."[129] Belief does not align with the terms of reason or logic, as if one could stand outside their experience and assimilate each part into a comprehensible whole. Rather, the religious believer finds herself immersed in experience, and then tries to find a way of accounting for it. Thus, the true threat to religion in the modern age is not advancement in our empirical knowledge, but rather skepticism of the authenticity of our subjective experience. The worst thing we can do is begin to doubt or call into question the legitimacy of this experience, to become too caught up in the complications and difficulties of metaphysical belief.

Perhaps the driving theme of Robinson's work, the conviction from which the rest of her thought stems, is the deficiency—or even the plain inaccuracy—of the modern

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[128] Ibid., 57

[129] "Interview: Marilynne Robinson," *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*

narrative of disenchantment. Robinson characterizes this narrative differently depending on the context, but overall she identifies it as the idea that we have crossed some sort of historical threshold after which all illusions are somehow irrevocably and miraculously dispelled and it is no longer possible to see the world and human life as unconditionally meaningful. Furthermore, the ideas of the great modern thinkers are seen as "insights into reality so deep as to be ahistorical," somehow fixed and inevitable, unlike the fallible ideas of the past.[130] While the narrative itself may be wrong, its widespread acceptance has gone largely unremarked and unchallenged, accompanied by a need to debunk all facets of human experience.

The core assumption of modern thought in all its variations, Robinson writes, "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."[131] The mind does not always, or even a majority of the time, proceed according to the terms of reason or logic. In a model prefaced on the idea that everything can be ordered and explained, it is stubbornly anomalous and unfathomably complex. The insight that it yields is only reliable in the sense that it tends to elude our own understanding and resist final explanation altogether. Thus, it is only possible to fully account for the human mind by discrediting it, dismissing much of what it causes us to think and feel as illusions that do not hold up under rational scrutiny.

Part of what makes Robinson's rejection of this narrative of modernity compelling is that it is not primarily intellectual in nature—she does not really think that the modern understanding of human beings that reduces them to knowable physical laws

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[130] *Absence of Mind,* 21
[131] Ibid., 22

should be replaced by better models. Rather, the problem with this modern understanding is that it doesn't reflect the subjective, felt experience of consciousness that each person intuitively knows on a personal level. If Robinson's opposition to much of modern thought seems at times startlingly sweeping, it is because she believes this sort of reductionist picture is one that has become a foundational assumption for a variety of disciplines, particularly the social sciences. In her essay "Freedom of Thought" Robinson describes her experience as an undergraduate:

> At a certain point I decided that everything I took from studying and reading anthropology, psychology, economics, cultural history and so on did not square at all with my sense of things, and that the tendency of much of it was to posit or assume a human simplicity within a simple reality and to marginalize the sense of the sacred, the beautiful, everything in every way lofty.[132]

We consider sacred or call beautiful that which resists the bounds of our understanding but which nonetheless strikes us as profoundly meaningful. The objective viewpoint of the social scientist, however, does not accommodate this internal sense of wonder or awe. Rather, the standards of these disciplines dictate that the observer isolate particular patterns of behavior in terms of what can be studied, quantified, and evaluated. But Robinson's broad and provocative characterization—that the social sciences, in their very approach, do not account for the richness of human experience—is nonetheless frustrating. Granting that many modern thinkers implicitly assume reductionist models, isn't it possible that the nature of our experience has in fact been altered, simply because

[132] *When I Was A Child I Read Books,* 5

our collective perception of our experiences has collectively shifted as a result of these models?[133]

Implicit in Robinson's argument, however, is the idea that the possibilities of human experience in the world have not changed as a result of modernity. It is not that beauty or meaningfulness has in some sense been removed, but rather that we have ceased to know how to acknowledge it. We have collectively accepted these simplistic and totalizing models on faith, despite what we may understand of ourselves apart from them. But the abundance of the world remains latent in our experience of it; this abundance cannot be taken away from us. Robinson writes of "that haunting compatibility of our means of knowing with the universe of things to be known. Yet, even as our capacity to describe the fabric of reality and the dimensions of it has undergone an astonishing deepening and expansion, we have turned away from the ancient intuition that we are a part of it all." That the human being was a "microcosm, a small epitome of the universe"—a persistent notion until the beginning of the modern scientific period—was not a naïve understanding that scientific advancement disproved. What happened, rather, was that we stopped taking into account those experiences that could not be verified or evaluated through scientific reasoning.[134]

Robinson is well-aware that the quintessentially modern thinkers she is most concerned with—Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and B.F. Skinner are the figures

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[133] In *A Secular Age,* Charles Taylor makes the similar point that arguments about the impossibility of belief in God in the modern age have become so widespread and pervasive that there is a way in which the actual validity of these arguments is no longer important. "In a certain sense, the original arguments on which this narrative rests cease to matter," he writes, "so powerful is the sense created in certain milieu, that these old views just *can't* be options for us" (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 590).
[134] Robinson, *Absence of Mind,* xii-xiv

frequently cited—are by no means identical or even compatible in their understandings of human being. What unites them for Robinson, however, is that they all make totalizing claims about human beings and exclude or subordinate cultural or historical testimonies that contradict their descriptive models. All of them assume that the Western understanding of what it means to be human, an understanding greatly fostered by religious narrative and doctrine as well as the classical and humanist traditions, has been wrong.[135] In doing so, these thinkers and the bodies of thought with which they are associated "exclude the great fact of human exceptionalism, though no one would deny that it is a pure expression of the human brain."[136] They assert that the diminishing of our understanding of human being and its role in the universe is the inevitable result of the knowledge we have gained about ourselves.

In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson gives a name to the kind of reductionist thinking that has flourished in the modern age: parascience. Parascientific literature, she writes, always proceeds from "a genesis of human nature in primordial life to a set of general conclusions about what our nature is and must be, together with the ethical, political, economic and/or philosophic implications to be drawn from these conclusions."[137] It is the idea that our essential selves are contained in our origins, accompanied by an often drastically simplistic idea of these origins. One of the biggest implications of this idea is that human agency is rendered an illusion: our true motivations exist at a great remove from our own lives, set into motion generations before we ever came into being as

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[135] *Absence of Mind,* xiii
[136] Ibid., 133
[137] Ibid., 32-33

individuals. That our minds are not our own is thus, for Robinson, the essential modern conviction:

> The conviction so generally shared among us, that we think in some ordinary sense of the word, that we reason and learn and choose as individuals in response to our circumstances and capacities, is simply—the one, crucial point of agreement between these otherwise incompatible theories—a persisting illusion serving a force or a process that is essentially unknown and indifferent to us.[138]

The rise of parascience has been enabled by the idea that in ridding ourselves of all notions of the transcendent, we achieve true freedom. But the implication of parascientific thinking is in fact the opposite. We may think we do something for a particular reason, but in fact we never know for sure why we have chosen one thing over another, or why we have responded in a particular way to a given situation. We may believe we are conscious agents, but we are actually ruled by our primitive and self-interested selves.

For Robinson, one of the biggest champions of this idea of conscious agency as an illusion is Sigmund Freud. In *Absence of Mind* she argues that Freud's conception of a universal human persona shaped by a single narrative was a reaction to the racial, cultural, and national fracturing of early twentieth century Europe, "an implicit challenge to a conception of the character of the unconscious as a substratum of racial and national identity."[139] It is a complex and undoubtedly provocative argument, important for my purposes here insofar as it points to the importance for Robinson of locating the great modern thinkers within their historically contingent circumstances. In addition to using Freud as an example of how modern ideas are often severed from the contexts in which

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[138] *Absence of Mind,* 71
[139] Ibid., 84

they arose, however, Freud is also a key thinker for Robinson in that he envisions human consciousness as mostly severed from a larger external reality. If there was a concrete historical moment when metaphysics gave way to parascience, she writes, it was "when European thought turned from epistemology and ontology to politics and parascience—and when Freud was creating his great narrative about the nature of the mind."[140]

In the Freudian model, according to Robinson, the world is primarily a threat to the well-being of the individual—or rather, the organism. The self only remains tied to a larger reality as much as is needed for its own survival; in effect it must ration its awareness so as to be able to endure its own consciousness.[141] The external world is not capable of imparting to us truth or meaning; instead, it besieges the individual with stimuli from which he or she must be protected and shielded. This sense of self and world alienation is perhaps best encapsulated in Freud's criticism of the "oceanic feeling" that religion fosters, which he describes as "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole."[142] The passage that Robinson cites from *Civilization and its Discontents* concerning this feeling is worth reproducing here:

> The idea of men's receiving an intimation of their connection with the world around them through an immediate feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psycho-analytic—that is, a genetic—explanation of such a feeling.[143]

After expressing incredulity that such a feeling could exist, Freud goes on to attribute the pervasiveness of this feeling to the arrested development of the ego. Originally, he explains, the ego is not perceived as being separate from the external world. Over time,

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[140] *Absence of Mind,* 99
[141] Ibid., 102
[142] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* 12
[143] Ibid.

however, the ego detaches itself from what is external to it in order to defend itself against sensations of displeasure. As differentiating between what is internal and what is external is one of the basic processes of maturity, those states in which "the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly" are instances of pathology.[144]

The fact that Freud ultimately dismisses a feeling of fundamental connection to the world as a primitive leftover from childhood reflects a distinctly modern skepticism about the possibility of consciousness to reflect and participate in a larger reality. Furthermore, Robinson points out, the psychoanalytic project as a whole implies that subjective experience—particularly experience that could be thought of as spiritual—is not to be trusted. She remarks:

> Freud's self is encapsulated, engrossed by an interior drama of which it cannot be made consciously aware—unless instructed in self-awareness, by means of psychoanalysis. That is to say, the center of emotional experience, the source of motive and inhibition, is inaccessible to the self as experience. The consciousness, whose ignorance of motive and inhibition is an accommodation to the demands of civilization, is therefore false, and civilization, the sum total of such accommodation, is false as well.[145]

The problem with the narrative of modernity does not turn for Robinson on the question of human consciousness alone, but consciousness as the builder of civilization, the force that has created the structures and institutions that we are now so eager to discredit and dismantle.

It is the modern inability to trust that our experiences are meaningful in themselves that has fostered a widespread cultural pessimism and led to a decline in the

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[144] *Absence of Mind,* 13
[145] Ibid., 105-106

studying of the humanities. "True" humanism as Robinson understands it has always been intrinsically dependent upon this trust. She writes in the introduction to *The Death of Adam* that "what used to be meant by 'humanism,' that old romance of the self, the idea that the self is to be refined by exposure to things that are wonderful and difficult and imbued with the human spirit, has ended."[146] Humanism was a sensibility, an aesthetic appreciation of and pleasure in the human presence, even in its darkest moments. It follows that the loss of this appreciation—what Robinson calls elsewhere an "imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly"—has been accompanied by a declining interest in literature, as we have ceased to recognize the meaningfulness of our own experience.[147]

If Robinson aims in her nonfiction to lay bare and critique the assumption that we have entered an age of impoverished or otherwise fundamentally demystified experience, her fiction constitutes her implicit counterchallenge to this idea, as an exploration of how human beings fit into the world. Her first novel, *Housekeeping*, is a portrait of consciousness that bears no resemblance to the modern understanding of consciousness as inauthentic or cut off from the world is some fundamental and irrevocable way. Consciousness as it is depicted in the novel does not separate one from the world, but is rather the fundamental mediating connection between the internal and external worlds. The miraculousness of consciousness is that it creates an openness and receptivity to the world precisely by remaining bound within the self.

Housekeeping is set in the small Far West town of Fingerbone, a town "chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness

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[146] *The Death of Adam*, 8
[147] *When I Was A Child I Read Books*, 21

that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere," and tells the story of Ruth and her sister Lucille, whose childhoods have been defined by terrible and intriguing loss.[148] This sense of loss, and the possibility of resolution that is carried with it, defines the consciousness of Ruth, the narrator; it shapes her observations, her memories, her entire way of seeing the world, creating a slippage between memory, imagination, and perception. Remarks Ruth, "I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses while that I have merely imagined."[149] Yet the ambiguity and final unknowability of the nature of experience never leads to doubt of one's own reality, for reality is not some sort of final and knowable state that lends itself to confirmation. Indeed, "reality" in the context of the novel translates into something like the interaction of consciousness with the external world; it could never be abstracted, separated from the work of the individual mind within its environment.

The instability of consciousness in the novel comes partly from its intrinsic relation to the enduring yet ever-changing landscape, namely, the glacial lake around which Fingerbone is built. Rather than being a mere backdrop for the novel, the lake is almost a character in itself, an active presence that shapes Ruth's consciousness and forms the locus of the narrative. Lucille and Ruth's grandfather died before they were born in a train wreck on the lake, a spectacular and mysterious event that claimed many lives and came to define the town. And when they were young, their mother drove off a cliff into the lake, leaving Lucille and Ruth to be raised by their grandmother and, when she dies, their aunt Sylvie. The lake is thus permeated with human presence, the cradle

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[148] *Housekeeping,* 62
[149] Ibid., 215-216

and preserver of the past: "Looking out at the lake one could believe that the Flood had never ended. If one is lost on the water, any hill is Ararat. And below is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, which perishes and remains."[150] As the site of memory, the lake is deeply familiar to Ruth, a place of solace. But in its Biblical significance and as a claimer of lives it is also enigmatic and powerful, even threatening—like the Deluge, it is "hardly a human world".[151]

In this way the lake has the power to subsume consciousness, to reconcile appearance and perception by absorbing them entirely within its darkness and depth. Ruth contemplates this possibility of resolution when she and Lucille spend the night on the lake, and she recalls memories of her mother and grandmother:

> Such details are merely accidental. Who could know but us? And since their thoughts were bent upon other ghosts than ours, other darknesses than we had seen, why must we be left, the survivors picking among flotsam, among the small, unnoticed, unvalued clutter that was all that remained when they vanished, that only catastrophe made noticeable? Darkness is the only solvent…it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be made perfect and permanent.[152]

There is a certain comfort in the thought of such resolution, as it erases the pain of loss. But it is also a resolution that passes beyond the human realm and enters into an otherness that cannot be fully understood; it resolves consciousness by extinguishing it. Though the reciprocal relationship between the human and non-human world is part of what constitutes consciousness, some final and essential distinction remains.

The need for resolution and restoration is nonetheless a central theme of the novel, as the accumulated past lying beneath the lake seems to suggest that a reclaiming

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[150] *Housekeeping,* 172
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid., 116

will one day be possible. Indeed, the possibility of resolution is not only expressed but arises through metaphor. Ruth contemplates, for example, how the finality of death is belied by the coming of spring when she thinks about two apple trees in her grandmother's orchard that have long ago ceased to blossom: "They have lost their bark and blanched white, and a wind will snap their bones, but if ever a leaf does appear, it should be no great wonder."[153] That such a change, an undoing of death, would be "no great wonder" points to the illusory nature of appearance, as what appears to have vanished may never have been lost. The possibility of renewal is always latent in the things of the natural world. The recurring analogy of our thoughts as reflections on water also indicates this remarkable persistence; just as a reflection may be disturbed in water but remain afterwards unbroken, so too do our thoughts persist "outside the brisk and ruinous energies of the world."[154]

That it is in the nature of thoughts to endure as memories or reoccur as imagination is what ultimately opens up the true possibility of renewal or resolution in the novel. When Ruth finds in her house a pamphlet with the words *I will make you fishers of men*, she imagines her aunt Molly, a missionary, sweeping a great net along the bottom of the lake. This harvesting, which will gather all that has been swallowed up over thousands of years, seems possible to Ruth from watching birds rise into the clouds and gnats sail out of the grass:

> Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion—that everything must finally be made comprehensible—then some general rescue of the sort I imagined my aunt to have undertaken would be inevitable. For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular

[153] *Housekeeping,* 124
[154] Ibid., 163

> anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?[155]

The critic James Wood pointed to this passage as evidence of Robinson's "abiding interest in the question of heavenly restoration."[156] Such a claim must be qualified, however, as the knitting up that Ruth is speaking of here is the work, or at least the impetus, of consciousness, specifically, human consciousness. While a final harvesting of the sort Ruth speaks of may never be accomplished, the mind strives towards such a unity every time we relate a particular memory to a present moment, or imbue the things of the world with a significance that transcends their mere appearance, or create a narrative that renders experience meaningful.[157]

The fact that Ruth speaks of consciousness in "human" terms, however, does not contradict Wood's interpretation, for one of the claims of the novel is that consciousness is somehow written into the fabric of the world in a way that opens unto the possibility of divine presence. One of the most remarkable passages of the novel is when Ruth imagines "a Carthage sown with salt." Such a home would not be desolate because the longing intrinsic to such a world would render experience more acute:

> For need can blossom into all the compensation it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know a thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. For to wish for

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155 *Housekeeping*, 92

156 James Wood, "The Homecoming"

157 Writes Robinson in the essay "Wondrous Love": "Narrative always implies cause and consequence. It creates paradigmatic structures around which experience can be ordered, and this certainty would account for the craving for it, which might as well be called a need." (*When I Was A Child I Read Books*, 126)

> a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again.[158]

Memory shows us what we are looking for, what we wish to return to, what resolution might look like. It is precisely because memory preserves the sense of loss that it can carry the promise of healing, for it creates within us the longing that pulls us forward, towards its own fulfillment. But it ultimately offers only a foreshadowing, a partial restoration; it preserves and orders experience, but it does not resolve it.

In *Housekeeping,* the work of consciousness as it is depicted through the character of Ruth is twofold. First, consciousness or personhood is in some sense written into the world itself, for the landscape is an active presence, a consciousness unto itself, rather than inanimate matter onto which the self projects meaning. Similarly, there is a sort of inherent order within experience that must be brought out, fragments which must be pieced together and rendered meaningful. Consciousness, finally, fits within the world because it can "read" the world, receive its meaning and translate it into language. That the world, in turn, lends itself to be read in this way shows that there is an inherent possibility of resolution written into the fabric of existence.

The ability of consciousness to make meaning out of what is given, to draw comparisons and distinctions and otherwise transform experience into narrative, is part of what Robinson means when she refers to the "singular dignity" of human beings. But this singularity also consists in the fact that human beings are the only beings with a "capacity for morally significant behavior, a singular capacity to do harm."[159] In its view of human beings, modern humanism proceeds from the belief that religion has instituted a false and

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[158] *Housekeeping,* 152-153
[159] "Cosmology," 52

hubristic divide between ourselves and the rest of nature, and that humanism, in contrast, recognizes that we are a part of nature. But Robinson points to the fact that this divide does not assume the superiority of human beings, but rather recognizes our unique capacity for great destruction. Similarly, the Darwinist worldview fails to see that what makes human beings different from animals is not only that we can act altruistically, but also that we often choose to disobey or disregard our own moral precepts. Writes Robinson: "The presence of human consciousness is a radical, qualitative change in the natural order…The striking thing about our species is that we create around us a vast *need* for a moral sense, to which our best instincts are clearly by no means equal."[160] Religion is one way in which this moral sense has been acknowledged and expressed. That religion has in the past violated its own moral principles and yet continues to affirm them testifies to their power, not to their hollowness.

This singular capacity for harm is expressed particularly strongly for Robinson in the thought of John Calvin, who is one of the central figures in her nonfiction and one of the primary influences on her own religious identity. In the essay "Puritans and Prigs," Robinson defends the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which teaches that "we are all absolutely, that is equally, unworthy of, and dependent upon, the free intervention of grace."[161] The benefit of such an understanding, she writes, is that it values humility in all cases: "For in fact life makes goodness much easier for some people than for others, and it is rich with varieties of cautious or bland or malign goodness, in the Bible referred to generally as self-righteousness, and inveighed against as grievous offenses in their own

[160] "Cosmology," 53
[161] *The Death of Adam* 155

right."[162] While the Christian tradition has always "assumed that rather few would be saved," the Calvinist model "allows for the mysteriousness of life" because it teaches us that true goodness—the type of goodness that will be saved—is not necessarily discernible to us. Robinson opposes this idea to a vision of "perfectionism", by which she means the belief that society can not only recognize the true "good" but can and should produce it. Such an idea is dangerous, she believes, because it sanctions and encourages the weeding out of "bad" people and ideas. Once we lose the understanding that "Gross error survives every attempt at perfection, and flourishes", we begin to think that we can act as gods, valuing and devaluing different parts of existence as we see fit.[163]

If what constitutes goodness is ultimately a mystery to us, what should be celebrated, acknowledged, even exalted is not goodness, but what Robinson calls in her novel *Gilead* "the exquisite and primary fact of existence."[164] Set in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, the novel is written from the perspective of the Reverend John Ames, an elderly Congregationalist pastor who is nearing death and reflecting on his life. In one sense the character of Ames serves as a means for Robinson for thinking about and responding to critiques of Christianity and of religion in general. But Ames is also, more broadly, a suggestion for how religious faith—faith in the way that Robinson conceives of it, in the sense of recognizing the ultimate mystery of existence—heightens our perception and helps us to grasp the meaningfulness of the mortal condition.

In *Housekeeping* there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual consciousness and the world, as consciousness does not strictly create meaning but rather

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[162] Ibid., 156
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid., 190

recognizes and articulates what is already in some way given. Similarly, in *Gilead* there is a framing power in religious practice, as it helps the individual to recognize what is already latent not just in our experience but in the world itself. "It is a remarkable thing to consider," Ames remarks several times in his private reveries, and *Gilead*, like *Housekeeping*, is replete with descriptions of moments of quiet remarkability. One such description is Ames' discussion of baptism:

> There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your mysterious life at the same time.[165]

Baptism is a brief moment of awakening that affords one a glimpse at an underlying reality often missed in daily life. This is, more broadly, one of the responsibilities and values of religion, for Robinson: to alert us to the existence of this underlying reality and help us to see the sacredness of the ordinary.

Ames' narration is imbued throughout the novel with a pure and wholehearted astonishment that recalls the ancient Greek idea of *thaumazein*, or wonder at what is. Reflecting on his meetings with members of his congregation, Ames describes this wonder at "the life that is the real subject of it all":

> By "life" I mean something like "energy" (as the scientists use the word) or "vitality," and also something very different. When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else.[166]

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[165] *Gilead*, 23
[166] Ibid., 44-45

When Ames qualifies his use of the word "life", he shows that what he means to privilege is really *human* life over a strictly scientific and biological sense of the word. Such life is defined by that almost mythic "I" that is itself meaningful without qualification, a human presence that is singular in its very ability to utter "I," regardless of what follows. That this presence "emanates itself" is a particularly beautiful turn of phrase in that it emphasizes the agency of the human presence, and the metaphor itself—the flame on a wick—implies a subtle but important distinction between some sort of internal core of selfhood and an external presence that shines forth into the world.

The notion that there is some sort of internal core in each person, a core mysterious even to the individual himself, is embodied in the character of Jack Boughton, the son of Ames' friend. When he was young, Jack fathered a child but refused to take responsibility for it and left town. His returning home decades later causes Reverend Ames much difficulty, as Ames feels unable to forgive him for what he did. Ames describes how, even before the incident with the girl, Jack seemed unable to be good and how he had a particular and mysterious sadness about him. "His transgressions were sly and lonely," Ames says, "and this became truer as he grew up…There was no sense in what he did, unless his purpose was to cause a maximum of embarrassment and a minimum of retribution."[167] Though Jack has caused others much pain in his life, there is the sense that this was always somehow despite himself. He is the prodigal son of his family, beloved by them but finally unable to accept this love, instead inexplicably compelled to reject it or disappoint it.

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[167] *Gilead,* 182

As he struggles with his feelings about Jack, Ames finds peace in the idea that there is a strange and profound beauty in human fallibility, and that to acknowledge this beauty is to emulate God's seeing of the world. He recalls an idea of Calvin's, that each person is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. "That metaphor has always interested me," Ames says, "because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental in the ordinary sense."[168] That God somehow takes pleasure in human fallibility frees us from the need to account for the mystery of our existence, to render it explainable. Towards the end of the book, when Ames is sitting with Jack on his porch, he reflects, "I wished I could sit at the feet of that eternal soul and learn. He did then seem to me the angel of himself, brooding over the mysteries his mortal life describes, the deep things of man. And of course that is exactly what he is."[169] Jack's transgressions, though they are terrible in the eyes of Ames, are in the same moment worthy of a kind of awe. In showing the way in which our actions often elude final explanation and rationale, they testify to the ultimate mysteriousness of mortal existence.

Intrinsic to Robinson's conception of the singularity and unknowability of each person is a kind of individualism—not the individualism that Rowan Williams sees in the thought of Isaiah Berlin, which is a product of the inevitable conflicts of interest that arise in a democratic society—but a more existential individualism, stemming from the deep interiority within each person. Following the passage about Jack quoted above, Ames observes:

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[168] *Gilead*, 124
[169] Ibid., 197

> In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live. We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us.[170]

There is an integrity and majesty to this idea of each person as a civilization unto themselves, but it is an integrity that, as in *Housekeeping*, does not resolve into being completely comfortable in the world. There is always an irremediable otherness within worldly encounters and experiences that can only be acknowledged and honored, as Ames comes to do with Jack. Indeed, there is a sense in which solitude is for Robinson the most fundamental human experience, for it is in solitude that one answers to oneself and apprehends one's individual, subjective existence in its relation to the whole of existence, or to Being, or to the divine.

Though religion is an inherently personal frame of perception, there is also a way in which a religious seeing of the world brings us into an ethical relationship with others. The singular unknowability within each being is for Robinson an analogy for, or even an example of, the ultimate unknowability of Being. In this way, the recognition of that elusive otherness within other people, of that which cannot be fully explained or accounted for but finally only acknowledged, opens up the possibility for the acknowledgement of Being, and in turn, the recognition of Being as ultimately unknowable awakens to our perception the divinity within another person. A religious

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[170] *Gilead,* 197

frame of understanding thus does not serve to resolve our existence in the world, but rather instruct it.

Robinson writes in *Absence of Mind* that "an attempt to re-integrate us into our cosmic setting might look like theology, or mysticism."[171] In one sense, this is because theology has historically provided a vocabulary for talking about existence; it can accommodate the great complexity, difficulties, and paradoxes of the concept. But it is also because theology, as Robinson remarks elsewhere, "always begins by assuming major terms."[172] The attempt at re-integration of human beings into the cosmos would begin with the assumption that the reality in which we find ourselves does not lend itself to final explanation. It would assume that we have an indelible place within this reality as beings that can grasp its inexhaustible meaningfulness, if not its ultimate meaning, and it would, finally, constitute an expression of gratitude for the mysterious and unqualified gift of existence.

[171] *Absence of Mind,* xv
[172] *The Death of Adam,* 117

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