

Notes of a Christian Exile, posthumously published in 2009, contains some of his most profound insights and powerful writing. As Charles Morris wrote in the *New York Times*, “*American Babylon* displays Neuhaus in all his virtues—elegantly argued and written, fair-minded and with a formidable range of reference—making the important point that politics without an anchor in a public morality can quickly slip away in dark directions,” as it did in the writing of Richard Rorty.

Neuhaus’s target in the chapter entitled “An Age of Irony” is the celebrated postmodernist philosopher and literary critic Richard Rorty (1931–2007), who saw himself as the successor of both Nietzsche and John Dewey. Neuhaus’s painstaking anatomy of Rorty’s elaborate, self-celebrating nihilism is a brilliant, antiseptic piece of revelation and

demolition: revealing how insidiously corrupt and fecklessly amoral the academy had become in its most pampered and praised specimens; and demolishing the rational and ethical claims to coherence and value of yet another “imperial self,” another self-styled heroic heretic, who mocks the broad daylight of proportion that greets each one of us as he or she wakes anew every morning. For Neuhaus, reason and grace, not irony and the self, had the last word.

Randy Boyagoda’s excellent biography provides an illuminating companion to Neuhaus’s own writings and a first-rate account of cultural politics in America over the past fifty years. In its understated and judicious way, it is also a moving tribute to a life of exemplary moral and intellectual discernment and courage—a truly religious life. †

MORAL MISADVENTURES IN PSYCHOLOGY

Daniel N. Robinson

Admirable Evasions: How Psychology Undermines Morality,
by Theodore Dalrymple (New York: Encounter, 2015)

On page 14 of this thin but thick offering, the author cites the French physician and philosopher Pierre Cabanis, the man in whose arms Mirabeau died. Cabanis represents the confident *Enlightenment* orthodoxy that would submit the most vexing social and political problems to the councils of science. His treatise on the rela-

tionship between the physical and the moral dimensions of life takes for granted that the latter are subject to full explication by the former.

Commenting on Cabanis, Thomas Carlyle might be seen as the harbinger of Dalrymples to come:

Hartley’s vibrations and vibratiuncles, one would think, were material and mechanical enough; but our Continental neighbours have gone still farther.

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One of their philosophers has lately discovered, that “as the liver secretes bile, so does the brain secrete thought”; which astonishing discovery Dr. Cabanis . . . in his *Rapports du Physique et du Morale de l’Homme*, has pushed into its minutest developments. . . . Thought, he is inclined to hold, is still secreted by the brain; but then Poetry and Religion (and it is really worth knowing) are “a product of the smaller intestines”! We have the greatest admiration for this learned doctor: with what scientific stoicism he walks through the land of wonders, unwondering.¹

The conviction held by humanistic scholars and displayed with uncompromising clarity and candor by Theodore Dalrymple is that scientific inquiry—by its very nature—evades the very conditions that frame an authentic and human form of life. Dalrymple takes his title from *King Lear* with Edmund’s dismissal of scientific buck passing. He pegs it as “an admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star.” One might substitute the astrological with genetics, brain processes, conditioning history, unconscious motivations, death wishes—every variety of causation except that which locates the evil in the man himself.

It is important to note that Dalrymple is not some irate amateur who simply fails to understand the nature and aims of science. He is an experienced physician and psychiatrist whose productive years witnessed extraordinary developments in neurophysiology, neurochemistry, and genetics. This same period marked a proliferation of departments of psychology, replete with massively funded research programs and a veritable army of PhD recipients. The result, on Dalrymple’s scale of values, is that all these outcomes, including their textual foundations, could

be jettisoned at no significant cost to an understanding of human nature.

To support this verdict, Dalrymple exposes widely distributed half-truths constructed more in the manner of an advertising campaign than of objective scientific reports. Phineas Gage, famous in neurology for “the American crowbar incident,” does not in fact support the contention that one’s fundamental character is causally determined by specific regions of the brain. Freud’s leap from the repression theory of hysteria to civilization and its discontents was and is a leap in the dark. Behavioristic modes of therapy have their greatest efficacy in the rhetoric that celebrates them but little in the clinical settings that have made use of them. These and related nostrums have engendered a measure of fragility easily parlayed into claims of psychological damage, even where no physical symptom is found. Thus:

In countries with adversarial tort systems of civil law, plaintiffs have a vested interest in maximizing the harm they have suffered. . . . Psychological consequences of injury . . . are both easy to fake and difficult to disprove (46–47).

Dalrymple notes and laments the self-love intoxicant now served up in classrooms and in therapeutic encounters. One is not to be identified as a failure; even red ink should be avoided in grading scripts! The mother of the repeat offender remains faithful to the view that “the real him” is a fine young man somehow acting in a manner not true to his good nature. Dalrymple even finds a patient relieved by the fact that her husband doesn’t choke her often. These are the evidentiary fragments that support the larger verdict regarding the fate of morality itself under the dead weight of psycho-social thinking.

Inevitably, this thinking infiltrates those institutions established to preserve a decent and civic form of life. Now refitted by psycho-social thought, the adjudicative arena comes to function not as the place that renders punishment justified and proportionate but rather as a preclinical mode of assessment designed to “treat” the offender for the conditions that allegedly promoted the offense. Dalrymple recognizes the utter incompatibility between a system of justice that sets determinate sentences and a therapeutic form of “justice” that incarcerates until the inmate is “cured” (67ff).

It is worth pausing here to consider a single case that speaks volumes about Dalrymple’s concerns and criticisms. Forty years ago a number of technical refinements and experimental findings encouraged another attempt to achieve desired psychiatric outcomes by way of surgery, *psychosurgery*. The earlier results of lobotomies produced more than an acceptable share of morbid outcomes, but the new techniques were sharply focused, sparing all but a negligible number of brain cells, and based not on the removal but on the stimulation of specific sites. A leader in this field was Dr. Robert Heath at Tulane. One patient, a homosexual repeat offender, was given the choice by a court between a period of imprisonment or therapeutic care in Tulane’s Department of Psychiatry. Choosing the latter would require institutional care until such time as the attending physicians judged the offender to be cured.

Correctly informed that homosexuality was notoriously refractory to standard forms of psychotherapy, the patient agreed to a promising alternative that included electrical stimulation of a region of the limbic system. Under local anesthesia, the patient was able to report the nature of the sensations arising from this stimulation. Once the desired sexual sensations were reliably

elicited, the electrode was cemented into position and subsequent stimulation was under the patient’s direct control. In time, and with the benefit of self-stimulation while watching heterosexual pornographic films, the patient asked to have access to a female sexual partner. He performed competently.² All this took place at a time when homosexuality was still listed as a treatable condition in psychiatry’s *Diagnostic and Statistics Manual* (DSM). Under prevailing Louisiana statutes, the defendant faced no more than thirty days of confinement. Instead, he subjected himself to a neurosurgical procedure of uncertain efficacy or a period of prolonged confinement for the treatment of a condition that twenty-five years later would not be a “condition” but a lifestyle.

If what Dalrymple classifies as “psychobabble” sings only to its own choir, might the developed science of genetics generate more credible explanations? Consider homicide rates. It has been noted that the rates match up with the African-American fraction of a large population. Dalrymple exposes the failure of racial theories, however, by noting the constant fraction of blacks in the U.S. population between 1900 and the 1980s, although the homicide rates during this period both increased and decreased significantly (89). Clearly, the data will not support eugenic approaches to antisocial behavior. It is equally clear that the functional organization of brains does not oscillate year by year in a way that would explain the oscillation in murder rates. Nonetheless, today’s social scientist continues to walk through a world of wonder unwonderingly.

As the final chapter is more epilogue than substantive, featuring a gloss on Dr. Johnson’s *Rasselas* and a useful dismissal of Milgram’s famous studies of obedience, it is the penultimate chapter that concludes the critique of dominant *isms*. The target is

neo-Darwinism and the ease with which the overwhelming complexity of actually *lived life* is squeezed into tubes other creatures need either to develop adaptations or to decompose.

Despite the intellectual brilliance of the neodarwinists, their ideas, at least about human life, are often at base of an astonishing crudity. They write like people who know that humans exist, but have never actually made contact with any. (107)

I am reminded of Matthew Arnold's reading of *Descent of Man* wherein this pedigree is set down: "We thus learn that man is descended from a hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits."³ Answering Huxley's defense of the thesis, Arnold takes it as very possibly true but,

"The hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habits," and this good fellow carried hidden in his nature, apparently, something destined to develop into a necessity for humane letters. Nay, more; we seem finally to be even led to the further conclusion that our hairy ancestor carried in his nature, also, a necessity for Greek.⁴

A necessity for Greek. Dalrymple, at one with Arnold, looks to the human achievement in its fullness and records a principled doubt as to the prospect of a science meaningfully translating or (worse) reducing it in such a way as to render it tractable. Whatever the remote origins of creatures somehow like us, the record of history reveals a striving at the moral and aesthetic levels not to be trivialized by notions of "selection pressure"

or fitness. All her drugs and charms finally failing, Calypso makes Odysseus an offer he presumably won't refuse. Stay with me, she says, and you will never change. Given the choice, Odysseus chooses humanity over divinity; more specifically, he chooses to be himself, which includes being husband to Penelope. The Greek that Arnold finds as a necessity in our nature is caught by Homer in book 23 of the *Odyssey* at the moment of reunion of a man and woman made for each other:

Then Odysseus in his turn melted, and wept as he clasped his dear and faithful wife to his bosom. As the sight of land is welcome to men who are swimming towards the shore, when Neptune has wrecked their ship with the fury of his winds and waves—a few alone reach the land, and these, covered with brine, are thankful when they find themselves on firm ground and out of danger—even so was her husband welcome to her as she looked upon him, and she could not tear her two fair arms from about his neck. Indeed they would have gone on indulging their sorrow till rosy-fingered morn appeared, had not Athena determined otherwise, and held night back in the far west, while she would not suffer Dawn to leave Oceanus, nor to yoke the two steeds Lampus and Phaethon that bear her onward to break the day upon mankind. †

- 1 Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times," *Edinburgh Review* (1829).
- 2 See Charles Moan and Robert Heath, "Septal stimulation for the initiation of heterosexual behavior in a homosexual male," *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 3, no. 1 (March 1972): 23–26.
- 3 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* bk. 2 (1871), 2, 389.
- 4 Matthew Arnold, "Literature and Science," the Rede lecture, Cambridge University, 1882.