The Soul Of The Marionette: A Short Enquiry Into Human Freedom
John Gray
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Are You An Illusion?
Mary Midgley

PERSONHOOD AND HUMAN FREEDOM
Every day we see patients whom we believe matter, because people matter. They often make real choices that we disagree with but we believe them to have dignity, worthy of our respect and care.

But what if we are making a mistake? What if we humans are really just machines or ordinary animals, with nothing special about our humanity? What if our job was really no different from that of a vet, or a car mechanic? Is there anything special about being human?

The big question is about the nature of human consciousness, and whether our actions are to some extent free. In the 1880s Thomas Huxley suggested that our thoughts and feelings are simply the idle side effects of our actions. They are like the whistle on the steam train: they attract our attention but do not drive the train. We are but ‘conscious automata’. By this account our consciousness is a mere epiphenomenon of the deterministic actions of our brain.

There is nothing new in these ideas; they are major themes of Martin Luther, David Hume, BF Skinner, and Daniel Dennett among many others. Science has not solved the riddle of human freedom for us, but has perhaps made some of the arguments clearer. Are we free persons with human dignity and real moral value, or are we only a collection of cells and neural impulses? Knowing whether people really matter (and therefore whether our job really matters) seems pretty vital. This pair of books is a good introduction.

John Gray is best known for his 2002 work Straw Dogs, propounding a post-humanist philosophy. Gray sees humans as animals who have fallen for the illusion of agency and freedom, while we are actually determined by our animal natures and pre-conscious decisions. Gray sees our consciousness, our mind, and thus the core of ourselves as notionally free persons, as the steam whistle, an accessory and not the thing it thinks itself to be.

The Soul of the Marionette explores what it is to be human by likening us to puppets. It is our lower animal brain that is pulling the strings. Notions of freel, and therefore of personhood, responsibility, and human dignity, cannot be demonstrated by neuroscience and therefore must be false. (CS Lewis famously called this ‘the abolition of man’.) Belief in the possibility of progress or human improvement is also a delusion, for:

‘... the cosmos is no longer ruled by laws that express any overarching purpose — divine or otherwise.’

Gray writes with an eclectic style, driven by ideas. Philosophically he owes much to Schopenhauer and the darker parts of Nietzsche. He states:

‘... humanity is only a name for a ragtag animal with no capacity to take charge of anything.’

I confess that it is hard to see why he so persistently takes charge of writing about man’s irrelevance if this is indeed the case. It reminds me of a radio interview I heard with BF Skinner’s daughter. In the 1950s Skinner wrote off human freedom and dignity and yet after a hard day’s writing returned home to be a loving and caring father to his family. Gray, together with some modern neuroscientists and biologists, has an ‘official’ philosophy that consciousness, freedom, and personhood are illusions and yet they live lives (and write books) in ways that appear to be based on exactly the opposite.

Are You an Illusion? Is a good antidote to Gray. Mary Midgley, a very young nonagenarian, is one of our brightest living philosophers. Her interests are personhood and the self, animals, the environment, and moral philosophy. She describes her:

‘... increasing exasperation at ... many well qualified scholars to claim, apparently in the name of science, that they believe themselves, and indeed their readers, not to exist, selves having apparently been replaced by arrangements of brain cells.’

Midgley opposes unthinking scientific reductionism. She takes our inner experience of ourselves seriously. She argues that:

‘... thoughts have their real place among other kinds of causes in the world ... Minds can affect brains as well as brains affecting minds.’

She argues that our current scientific models are incomplete, and that true models may overlap even where they appear incompatible. Science tells us that apparently solid tables are mostly empty space but that does not mean we should stop putting our coffee cups on them. Just as we can accommodate more than one way of thinking about tables so we can accommodate more than one way of thinking about ourselves. A unifying theory is unnecessary. Gray and Midgley do agree that science does not tell us all we need to know. Gray states:

‘Science is a method of enquiry, not a view of the world.’

Midgley states:

‘Science is unfortunately not composed of ready made facts. People who formulate those facts have to use assumptions: patterns of expectation, within which they select, arrange, shape and classify their data.’

Both agree that observations do not themselves give us the theories via which observation must be interpreted. Einstein supported Popper’s view that:

‘Theory cannot be fabricated out of the results of observation, but that it can only be invented’.

Gray states:

‘... adopting a world view is more like selecting a painting to furnish a room than testing a scientific theory’.

If so, my money is on Midgley, seeing humanity as both ‘... peculiar and sublime.’

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