

Imagining the Gifford Lectures: 134 not out

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The Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology are a cultural monument to the enduring ideals of an educated public, established in a nation which has done much to nurture and export the value of sacred and secular learning.¹ They are among the most prestigious in the academic world, and in no small part because they are intended to speak to audiences beyond that world. There are few popular writers and speakers on matters of religious or philosophical significance who do not desire the recognition of the academy; and there are few academics who do not wish they had a larger audience. If you are awarded a Gifford Lectureship, the implication is that you are worthy of both.

For historians, the ‘back catalogue’ of Giffords provides a window onto some of the changes which have marked the past 134 years of intellectual and spiritual life in Scotland and the wider world.² Men who were ineligible

¹ See R. D. Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). This cannot be neatly untangled from the role of Scotland in the British Empire, where education served colonial and missionary interests: see Phillip Constable, “Scottish Missionaries, ‘Protestant Hinduism’ and the Scottish Sense of Empire in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century India”, *The Scottish Historical Review* 86, no. 2 (October 2007): 278–313.

² The reader is invited to explore the archive founded in 2003 by Sir John



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for active service still delivered Gifford lectures during two world wars.³ The series is associated with remarkable men and women, Nobel Prize winners,⁴ and one former Prime Minister who is best remembered for issuing a political declaration which would help shape the course of twentieth-century history and beyond: Arthur Balfour delivered two series of lectures in Glasgow either side of World War I (1913–1914; 1922–1923).⁵ But for every major public intellectual, such as Balfour, and every canonical figure within or across disciplines – such as William James (1900–1902, Edinburgh) or Iris Murdoch (1981–1982, Edinburgh) – there are lecturers whose names and works have vanished from our cultural consciousness. We are proposing an excavation of the archive: to honour the greats of the Giffords, to retrieve forgotten contributions, and share stories about this legendary series – the speakers, their publics, and their legacies.

In this first foray into the Giffords, I discuss two public intellectuals who were awarded peerages for their professional distinction: first and foremost, the man without whom this article would not exist, Lord Adam Gifford; this is followed by some reflections on the work of Baroness Mary Warnock, one of the few lecturers to speak directly on this issue's topic of imagination.



Lord Gifford's will

To read the will of Adam Gifford (1820–1887),⁶ is to step into a world

Templeton: *The Gifford Lectures: Over 100 Years of Natural Theology*, run by the Templeton Religion Trust, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/>, from where I have taken most of the historical data. Early Gifford lectureships sometimes ran over several academic years; this is less common today. Some sources, including published Gifford lectures, record the academic year(s) a particular speaker received the honour; others just record the calendar year they delivered the lecture(s). This accounts for some of the variations in published listings.

³ For a centenary appreciation see Stanley L. Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures: A Centenary Retrospect* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986).

⁴ Including Henri Bergson (1913–1914, Edinburgh); Nathan Söderblom (1930–1931, Edinburgh); Albert Schweitzer (1934–1935, Edinburgh); Charles Scott Sherrington (1937–1938, Edinburgh); Niels Bohr (1949–1950, Edinburgh); Werner Heisenberg (1955–1956, St Andrews); John Eccles (1978–1979, Edinburgh).

⁵ See Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁶ *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT of the late Adam Gifford, sometime one of the Senators of the College of Justice, Scotland, dated 21st August*



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which is instantly recognisable and immediately strange. Some elements are distinctively Scottish: the places, the churches, the legalese ('secluding heirs portioners' was a subordinate clause to be reckoned with). But Gifford granted his principal heirs the right to spend their fortunes, in land and property investments, throughout the archipelago we call the United Kingdom.⁷ And although the will was composed several decades later, and under an assuredly nonfictional legal jurisdiction, parts of the document would not feel out of place in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*.⁸ The document bears witness to the realities of nineteenth-century class distinctions, male-preference primogeniture, changing currents of religious thought, and is seasoned with sentimental rhetorical flourishes on high moral and theological ideals. And if the (presumed) error in the on-line version of the will had been in the original document, the 'Senatus Academicus of the University of Edinburgh' might have argued that they were due an additional £100,000 in their legacy, thereby triggering the Scottish equivalent of the infamous fictional case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce⁹ – a legal dispute potentially so protracted that we might still be waiting for the first lecture. Transcription errors and counterfactual histories aside, as a distinguished solicitor, advocate and judge, Gifford made his intentions very clear regarding the distribution of his estate – not least through a gift to Scottish intellectual culture which has been to his edification and our delight.

Gifford was born into a family of successful leather manufacturers and enjoyed a lucrative legal career before being appointed to the Court of Session as Lord Gifford. He was the eldest son of James, who ran the family business and became Master of the Edinburgh Merchant Company.¹⁰ Gifford's generosity to his extended family in his will – to friends, to employees and, indeed, their spouses – is striking. His wife,

1885. The document is available as 'Lord Adam Gifford's Will', <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lord-gifford/will>

⁷ *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT*.

⁸ *Bleak House* was originally published serially (1852–1853) and satirised the activities of the courts of Chancery.

⁹ The legal case in *Bleak House* concerned a contested will within the Jarndyce family. In this copy of Gifford's will (see n. 6) the currency sign (£) is omitted and the figure actually reads '125,000'.

¹⁰ Mary Raleigh, ed., *John Gifford: Memories and Letters* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1896), 96. Adam's brother, John, was a successful banker.



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Margaret, died almost twenty years earlier; they had one child, Herbert, the primary individual beneficiary. One actually has to read a long way down the document, through tranches of nephews, nieces, clergymen, and servants before reaching the bequest for which Gifford is famous: the lectureships which adorn the four ancient Scottish institutions of higher learning. The ancients may be presumed equals in the *spirit* of the Giffords, but rather like the creatures of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), some universities are 'more equal than others', materially speaking – friends of St Andrews look away now. Gifford left the largest sum, £25,000, to his alma mater, Edinburgh (who do seem to have the uncanny knack of appointing Nobel laureates);¹¹ Glasgow and Aberdeen both received £20,000; and St Andrews £15,000, which Gifford seems to have considered more than enough for a university forever able to bask in the glory of being Scotland's most ancient.

According to the Bank of England's method of calculation, the goods and services that Gifford's £80,000 capital investment would buy in 1885 would give you the purchasing power today of almost £11,000,000.¹² And what was Gifford's aim?

'Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing the study of Natural Theology', in the widest sense of that term, in other words, 'The Knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and the Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence, the Knowledge of His Nature and Attributes, the Knowledge of the Relations which men and the whole universe bear to Him, the Knowledge of the Nature and Foundation of Ethics or Morals, and of all Obligations and Duties thence arising.'¹³



Natural theology and natural theologians

Gifford's vision is, in many ways, a continuation of the soaring confidence in natural theology which was characteristic of the European

¹¹ See n. 4.

¹² The Bank's inflation calculator allows one to search as far back as 1209: <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>. I have given a rounded figure as there is insufficient data for inflation beyond 2021.

¹³ *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT*.



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Enlightenment, not least in Scotland, which existed alongside (and sometimes complimented) scepticism concerning revealed religion.¹⁴ Gifford's goals were less apologetic than, say, the older Boyle lectures (which also flourish today),¹⁵ and less parochial in confessional scope. Gifford, a scholar and lecturer himself, had interests which ranged from the mysticism of St Bernard of Clairvaux, to the monism of Benedict de Spinoza, the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the religious traditions of India.¹⁶ In his best-selling and controversial textbook *Catholicism*, Richard McBrien wrote: 'When "theology" is done without faith, it isn't theology at all. It is a *philosophy of religion*. The theologian reflects on his or her faith-commitment and that of his or her faith-community'.¹⁷ So much the worse for 'theology' so conceived, one might well think, but this is probably not an unusual view among Christian thinkers – if it could be professed by the late Father McBrien, with his church's robust traditions in natural theology, it seems unlikely to be an outlier position. For Gifford, however, natural theology, was open to anyone:

[Lecturers] may be of any denomination whatever, or of no denomination at all [...]; they may be of any religion or way of thinking, or as is sometimes said, they may be of no religion, or they may be so-called sceptics or agnostics or freethinkers, provided only that the 'patrons' will use diligence to secure that they be able, reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth.¹⁸

It seems unlikely that Gifford could envisage just how large the demographic 'no religion' would become when he included it within his

¹⁴ See M. A. Stewart, "Religion and Rational Theology", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31–59.

¹⁵ See John J. Dahn, "Science and Apologetics in the Early Boyle Lectures", *Church History* 39 no. 2 (June 1970): 172–86.

¹⁶ For insights into all Gifford's interests, see the eleventh lecture by James Hutchison Sterling, *Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890).

¹⁷ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, rev. edn. (New York: Harper One, 1994), 41.

¹⁸ *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT*.



capacious participatory vision.¹⁹ The social role of the religious ‘freethinker’ in Scotland, and the wider United Kingdom, was important when Gifford wrote his will, and it carried risks in an age when Christianity – often of a specific confessional variety – was culturally and politically normative. The social value of its currency has probably declined in our own time, however, where the refusal to conform to Christianity – or to profess any religious commitment at all – is utterly unremarkable and can easily manifest itself as the received wisdom of our own age just as Christianity once reigned as an unexamined presumption. But as Bertrand Russell (a notable omission from the Giffords) argued, the best traditions of free thought are concerned with the *manner of holding* beliefs, rather than the *content* of beliefs.²⁰ And on that basis the Giffords have hosted a dazzling array of free-thinkers, from the thoroughly independent Lutheran Albert Schweitzer²¹ to the humanistic atheist Lord Martin Rees (2007, St Andrews).

In terms of religious diversity, the ‘patrons’ have, to a large extent, delivered on their mandate. Within Christianity, notable Roman Catholics include the medievalist and philosopher Étienne Gilson (1930–1932, Aberdeen); anthropologist Mary Douglas (1989, Edinburgh); philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre (1987–1988, Edinburgh), Michael Dummett (1996–1997, St Andrews); and Charles Taylor (1998–1999, Edinburgh; 2009, Glasgow). There have been Protestants of various stripes: William Temple (1932–1934, Glasgow); Karl Barth (yes, really: no one could accuse the appointing committee in Aberdeen for 1937–1938 of lacking a sense of irony);²² Emil Brunner (1946–1948, St Andrews); Rudolf Bultmann

¹⁹ At the time of writing, Scotland’s 2022 Census is still being conducted: in 2011, the proportion of the population who identified with ‘no religion’ was 36.7%, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/religion/>.

²⁰ See Bertrand Russell, “The Value of Free Thought”, in *Understanding History: And Other Essays* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 57–104.

²¹ See n. 4.

²² This towering theologian is famous for his repudiation of natural theology: in the Preface to the first volume of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932–1967), he associated it with the work of the ‘anti-Christ’, although towards the end of his vast project there are traces of a more sympathetic attitude in the form of ‘secular parables’: see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* vol. 4, pt. 3, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).



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(1954–1955, Edinburgh); Alvin Plantinga (1987, Aberdeen; 2004–2005, St Andrews); Kathryn Tanner (2016, Edinburgh); and N. T. Wright (2018, Aberdeen), to name but a few. Eastern Orthodoxy, however, is poorly represented: apparently honourable exceptions would include the philosophically rigorous defender of theism Richard Swinburne (1982–1984, Aberdeen) and the great historian of Christian doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan (1992–1993, Aberdeen), but they converted years after their lectureships.²³

There have been many important Jewish thinkers, including Henri Bergson (1913–1914, Edinburgh); Hannah Arendt (1972–1974, Aberdeen), who was also the first woman; George Steiner (1990, Glasgow); and Jonathan Sacks (2008, Edinburgh). Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1980–1981, Edinburgh) was the first Muslim lecturer; Mona Siddiqui (2016, Aberdeen), surely among most famous Islamic scholars in world, was the first Muslim woman to be given the honour. Some friends of the Giffords, and I count myself among them, would welcome more contributions from members of non-Abrahamic religions, as part of a wider engagement with traditions beyond Europe and the (small) set of revolving countries from within the Anglosphere. The Giffords started promisingly on this score with the inaugural lecturer, the philologist and orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1888–1892, Glasgow), who devoted much of his fourth and final series of lectures to the Indian traditions of Vedanta. Like so many of the European pioneers of religious studies, however, Müller’s methods, assumptions and legacy are controversial.²⁴ It may be an exaggeration to say that we have heard enough Western voices on Buddhism and Asian religions generally to last us another 134 years, but more Asian perspectives on the traditions birthed in that continent would surely enrich our understanding.²⁵

²³ See Ambrose Mong Ih-Ren, “Return to Orthodoxy: An Examination of Jaroslav Pelikan’s Embrace of the Eastern Faith”, in *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5, no. 1 (2014): 59–83; and Richard Swinburne, “Natural Theology and Orthodoxy”, in *Turning East: Contemporary Philosophers and the Ancient Christian Faith*, ed. Rico Vitz (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 47–78.

²⁴ See Tomoko Masuzawa, “Our Master’s Voice: F. Max Müller After a Hundred Years of Solitude”, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 15 no. 4 (January 2003): 305–28.

²⁵ We can and should remain grateful to those learned European scholars who



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One might argue that as a non-theistic religion, Buddhism would not conform to the letter of Gifford's will, but it is surely in keeping with his generosity of religious spirit, and it would be unjust given the number of trenchant atheists who have got the call – A. J. Ayer (1972–1973, St Andrews); Richard Dawkins (1988, Glasgow). The latter is at least superficially interested in natural theology and most of all in combatting design arguments;²⁶ the former denied the meaningfulness of religious discourse all together,²⁷ which wouldn't seem to be the most promising starting place for a series of theology lectures. On the other hand, one plausible topic of natural theology – or a prolegomenon to it – is the question of its legitimacy, so I shall place Ayer alongside Barth in my canon of quirky Gifford lectureships.

The traditional view of natural theology, at least according to the online resource funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, defines it as 'the attempt to prove the existence of God and divine purpose through observation of nature and the use of human reason'.²⁸ Just a few minutes perusing the archive will show that this 'traditional' view has been very well served. It seems fair to say, however, that a more 'modern view' has come to inform the choices of Gifford committees in recent times, whereby natural theology draws

from the insights of religion to pull together the best of human knowledge from all areas of human activity. In this understanding natural theology attempts to relate science, history, morality and the arts in an integrating vision of the place of humanity in the universe. This vision, an integrating activity of reason, is religious to the extent it refers to an encompassing reality that is transcendent in power and value.²⁹

have taught us valuable lessons: including Müller himself, Ninian Smart (1979–1980, Edinburgh) and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2015, Glasgow).

²⁶ See Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); and *The God Delusion* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), chaps. 3–4.

²⁷ See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), especially chaps. 1, 6.

²⁸ "What is Natural Theology?", <https://www.giffordlectures.org/overview/natural-theology>

²⁹ "What is Natural Theology?"



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This indicates a welcome expansion of the discipline, opening it up to many more things that can reasonably be considered natural. The arts, inextricably linked to imagination, have often played the role of Cinderella to the ‘vain sisters’ of philosophy and the natural sciences, and one hopes their time has come.

But the *natural* in ‘natural theology’ is potentially so broad that any configuration of atoms in the universe, or any human idea, could be the subject of critical reflection, and the question of what makes the reflection *theological*, and therefore in keeping with the intentions of Gifford, is a persistent one.³⁰ I recall a conversation with a friend at the start of a series of lectures delivered by Judith Butler (2018, Glasgow). As the crowds thronged in the quads and cloisters, my friend asked: ‘When was the last time people queued up like this for a theology lecture?!’ I am sorry to report, dear reader, that my cynicism got the better of me: ‘Probably the last time a Gifford committee invited a famous academic with a strong following on the left of politics, and when we can confidently expect references to “God” to be conspicuously absent – perhaps Noam Chomsky’s lecture in memory of the late Edward Said?’³¹ My friend was less flippant: ‘surely the inequality of grievability [a theme of Butler’s first lecture] is a subject for theology’. And he was right, of course. It is, moreover, a good thing that the voice of a gay Jewish woman is now welcome within a traditionally patriarchal and heteronormative discipline where Christians have dominated the discourse. But if the lecture itself had been given in a politics series, a moral philosophy series, or a series in the tradition of secular humanism, for that matter, it would have worked just as well. One might avoid all these questions, of course, and take a lesson from the artistic experiment of Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917): if something is approved by a committee overseeing a series of ‘natural theology lectures’, then it’s natural theology.³² Period.

³⁰ See John Haldane, “Scotland’s Gift: Philosophy, Theology, and the Gifford Lectures”, *Theology Today* 63, no. 4 (January 2007): 469–476: 476.

³¹ 2005, Edinburgh. Like Butler, many of Chomsky’s formative influences came from his Jewish upbringing and education. Said, an American Palestinian, was raised a Christian.

³² Working under a pseudonym, Duchamp submitted a porcelain urinal to the Society of Independent Artists, New York, of which he was a director and founding member. The board narrowly voted against displaying the piece at their inaugural





Mary Warnock (1924–2019): Public intellectual

Although there are many women included within Gifford's will, his relatives and beneficiaries, there is no indication that he could have envisaged one holding a lectureship, and it would be over eighty years before a woman would grace a series. Thankfully, there have been many more since Arendt broke the mould: including Mary Midgley (1989–1990, Edinburgh); Martha Nussbaum (1992–1993, Edinburgh); Marilyn McCord Adams (1998–1999, St Andrews); Onora O'Neill (2000–2001 and 2013–2014, Edinburgh); Patricia Churchland (2010, Edinburgh); and Mary Beard (2018–2019, Edinburgh). In 1992, Glasgow hosted the philosopher Mary Warnock.

Accessibility has always been a guiding value of the Giffords: the lectures have to be 'free' to the public and they have to be 'popular'.³³ It seems fair to say that maintaining the former has been easier than the latter. And I am not just talking about the disappointing turnouts we occasionally witness, when the great British (mostly Scottish) public vote with their feet in favour of, well, anything other than the Gifford lectures.³⁴ The ability to communicate effectively to non-specialist audiences is unevenly distributed, even among those able enough to be considered for the Giffords. Warnock was a safe appointment on that score: she taught in world-class universities, in a discipline dominated by men, and in girls' high schools; she moved with apparent ease between audiences at very different levels of academic development.³⁵ She was, in truth, an exemplary public intellectual: Warnock specialised in ethics, education, and had a keen interest in Jean-Paul Sartre; she wrote books of academic distinction in those areas, popularised her ideas, and impacted public policy: in the 1970s this concerned the education of children with disabilities;³⁶ in the 1980s, human fertilisation and

exhibition, although replicas have been approved by many committees since. See Sophie Howarth and Jennifer Mundy, 'Marcel Duchamp: Fountain', Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>

³³ *TRUST DISPOSITION and SETTLEMENT*.

³⁴ In the digital age, however, there is no reason why live lectures that were poorly attended cannot find their audience, long before a published version appears.

³⁵ See Mary Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places* (London: Duckworth 2000).

³⁶ See *The Warnock Report: Special Educational Needs: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1978).



embryology.³⁷ Warnock's Gifford lectures were entitled "Imagination and Understanding", which form some of the chapters of her *Imagination and Time*,³⁸ discussed below.



The existential imagination

Warnock's sustained interest in Sartre is intriguing: whereas she was a philosopher of the establishment, Sartre was arguably twentieth-century Europe's quintessential intellectual rebel. But they shared a view of philosophy as a social good. Warnock's most extended discussion of Sartre in *Imagination and Time* is in Chapter 3, where she approaches imagination through the prism of developments in continental philosophy, beginning with Franz Brentano's reintroduction of the Scholastic concept of 'intentionality' into modern thought in his *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (1874).³⁹ This 'directedness' or 'aboutness' of mental states has become one of the defining characteristics of the mind in both continental and analytic traditions of philosophy. The descriptive psychology discussed by Brentano, which he distinguished from the generic (third-person scientific approach), was taken up most forcefully by Edmund Husserl, who helped to birth one of the most important traditions in twentieth-century philosophy – phenomenology, which provided a new theoretical underpinning for Sartre's existentialist orientation.⁴⁰

Just as the human mind is typically conscious *of* something, the imagination is likewise 'directed' *at* something, or has some representational content, however creatively arranged. In *L'Être et le néant* (1943),⁴¹ Sartre emphasized the distinctive human capacity to imagine, and sometimes realise, futures radically different from the past: we humans are 'beings-for-ourselves', whereas the rest of nature, certainly inanimate nature, is composed of 'beings-in-themselves'.⁴² As 'beings-for-themselves', humans are burdened by their freedom: 'not able merely to resign themselves to the inevitability of causal laws', they 'must

³⁷ See the Warnock Chaired *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1984).

³⁸ Warnock, *Imagination and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

³⁹ *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

⁴⁰ See Warnock, *Imagination and Time*, 49–52.

⁴¹ *Being and Nothingness*.

⁴² Sartre, paraphrased by Warnock: *Imagination and Time*, 56.



constantly take decisions about what should happen next, what they should do, and for what, if any, reason; and this endless capacity to choose is almost intolerable to them'.⁴³

The challenge this freedom brings is intensified in a world where we are perpetually tossed around on the unquiet waters of a world not of our own making. Warnock illuminates one of Sartre's own responses to this human predicament through her discussion of the existential function of the arts within his novels, especially through Sartre's alter ego, Roquentin, in *La Nausée* (1938). In the novel 'Roquentin decides to become a writer, to acquire a foothold in the world by creating a purely imaginary entity, a world of art, which will persist for ever'.⁴⁴ The sense of artistic control here must indeed have its attractions, but this can hardly have proved satisfactory for long. As anyone who has ever tried and failed to write a novel will tell you, the infinite possibilities of narrative and stylistic choice are as liable to overburden and overwhelm the sovereign subject as they are in any other domain of life.



Imagination and genius

Popular perceptions of imagination include the unselfconscious expressiveness of young children, and the works of those men and women of genius who tend to dominate perceptions of the artist. Warnock hints at her sympathy with the latter in her choice of epigraph, taken from the closing moments of Kenneth Clark's epic and controversial BBC television series *Civilisation: A Personal View* (1969). Clark gives voice to such (apparently) reactionary views as 'order is better than chaos, creation better than destruction,' and 'all living things are our brothers and sisters'. In addition to such humanistic (even post-humanistic) sentiments, however, Clark also states: 'Above all, I believe in the God-given genius of certain individuals, and I value a society that makes their existence possible'.⁴⁵ This is where the controversy ratchets up. For the societies that have produced these 'geniuses', including the Athenian which Clark lauds

⁴³ Warnock, 57.

⁴⁴ Warnock, 55.

⁴⁵ All 13 episodes of the BBC series are available to watch on YouTube; for Clark's closing remarks see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XofkKmPrYA&t=19s>.



over the Viking,⁴⁶ have often been based on systems of exploitation which have allowed some individuals the leisure to develop their skills for the production of works to delight social elites. And in terms of political theology, there has always been a danger that an appreciation of ‘God-given talents’ is exploited by those who presume the divine authority of their social order: societies in which some individuals of ‘genius’ flourish while others do not. Warnock, who addresses the topic of genius most fully in Chapter 2, does not engage with this line of criticism: despite exploring the concept’s development in the work of David Hume (which might have been juxtaposed with his increasingly controversial attitudes to ‘savage tribes’),⁴⁷ and in the thought of Immanuel Kant (with his complex and contentious attitudes to colonialism and race).⁴⁸

One might argue that it would be unfair to expect a book published in 1994 to pursue these arguments but, as indicated above, the concept of ‘genius’ and ‘civilisation’ articulated by Clark was already self-consciously unfashionable and the subject of extensive critique.⁴⁹ Warnock does nevertheless provide an instructive genealogy of ‘genius’, in English, which invites a more critical approach. The term as used, for example, in Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), which would become ‘part of the Romantic stock-in-trade of the late eighteenth century’,⁵⁰ was an invention of the late Enlightenment. It found no place in Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755), where the majority of entries for ‘genius’ designate ‘either the particular spirit (personified or not) of a place, or, when used of people, their particular bent or cast of mind’.⁵¹ The social and political context for the personalisation and

⁴⁶ See Clark, Episode 1: By the Skin of our Teeth, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxEJn7dWY60>.

⁴⁷ David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), §1, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/robertson-the-natural-history-of-religion>; see also, Aaron Garrett and Silvia Sebastiani, “David Hume on Race”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31–43.

⁴⁸ See Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi, eds., *Kant and Colonialism: Historical and Critical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁹ See n. 45. The most famous response to Clark was John Berger’s four-part BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972), which is also available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=john+berger+ways+of+seeing.

⁵⁰ Warnock, 27.

⁵¹ Warnock, 27.



individualisation of genius, in the late eighteenth century cries out for analysis. But Warnock was not a social or political historian, nor a historian of art, and no such analysis is undertaken in *Imagination and Time*.



Imagination as cognition, creation and judgement

Warnock's actual point of departure for her enquiry, prior even to Brentano's descriptive psychology and Husserl's phenomenology, are the foundational eighteenth-century responses to Cartesian legacies in metaphysics and epistemology: those dualisms, whereby the human mind is conceived as ontologically distinct from the body; and where we can have incorrigible knowledge of *res cogitans*, but where our knowledge of *res extensa* is open to radical doubt. For René Descartes, doubt is only overcome once he has established his first principle, *je pense, donc je suis* ['I am thinking therefore I exist'],⁵² and his confidence in the existence of a supremely perfect God who is the ultimate epistemological guarantor against deception.⁵³ The canon of Romantics, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, constitute perhaps the most vivid, artistic repudiations of that worldview, but Warnock's principal concern is the philosophical context for that dramatic shift.

Warnock gives Hume a leading role in the history of imagination in modern European philosophy. Hume did not share Descartes's confidence in natural theology as a discipline in its own right,⁵⁴ never mind as a resource from which we could secure the foundations for our most basic intuitions. Hume gave imagination the task of unifying the raw empirical data which, by itself, leads to scepticism: doubts about the existence of the self, and doubts about the continuous existence of the external world. Imagination performs 'the feat of making us believe that the world is peopled by continuous and independent objects filling in the gaps in our

⁵² Better known by the Latin translation, *Cogito ego sum*, but stated first in pt. 4 of Descartes' *Discourse on Method* [*Discours de la méthode*, 1637], ed. and trans. Jonathan Bennett, Early Modern Texts, <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1637.pdf>

⁵³ See Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, pt. 4. Descartes developed this line of argument in his *Meditations* (1641).

⁵⁴ Most obviously in Hume's posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779).



actual experience'.⁵⁵ This same faculty enables human beings to connect those ideas and impressions which are no longer immediate (the past) with those which are (the present), and so on Hume's account, 'Memory should be regarded as a sub-class of imagination',⁵⁶ rather than an independent faculty. For all the theoretical work that imagination does for Hume, however, he still tended to treat it as the poor relation in his subordinate trinity of mental faculties: below the senses and reason. Consequently, he could never completely keep scepticism at bay. In more confident moments, Hume sought a clear demarcation between the reliable and unreliable facets of imagination: distinguishing between 'principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; [...] and the principles which are changeable, weak and irregular'.⁵⁷ For Warnock, the most durable philosophical bridge between Hume's ambivalent attitude to imagination, and the soaring confidence of the Romantics, was provided by the Kantian revolution.⁵⁸

In his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*,⁵⁹ Kant argued that what Hume thought of as 'universal' principles of the imagination built up by experience (e.g. causality, identity, time) were actually *a priori* categories of understanding: the necessary preconditions for any knowledge of the world. Warnock locates these within a subset of Kant's conception of imagination, which I would hesitate to do: the '*a priori*' imagination, she argues, as opposed to the 'empirical'.⁶⁰ But however one characterises his categories, Kant liberates the imagination from the cognitive constraints of the understanding conditioned by those categories, and it is through the 'free play' of the imagination and the understanding that aesthetic judgements are made:⁶¹ judgements which are subjective in origin (our taste) and yet universal in their expectation of the assent of others. By construing knowledge as the conformity of appearances to *a priori* principles of

⁵⁵ Warnock, 9.

⁵⁶ Warnock, 7.

⁵⁷ Hume, quoted by Warnock, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Warnock acknowledges Platonic and Berkeleyan influences, too, but space prohibits my discussion of these.

⁵⁹ *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787).

⁶⁰ Warnock, 12.

⁶¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790], ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Guyer and Eric Mathews (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pt.1.



understanding, Kant helped dissolve the Cartesian boundary between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ world: experience, in the sense that is relevant for scientific knowledge, presupposes *a priori* concepts; but *a priori* concepts require experience to produce knowledge. Indeed, Kant would repudiate the *res cogitans* as a substance ontologically distinct from the material world, conceiving the self as a point of view on that world. In this post-Kantian world, Warnock suggests, the conviction arose that ‘to attend to the world is to be conscious of both the world and oneself; and that in this attention the sharp boundary between the inner and outer, the so-called “subjective” and “objective” collapses’.⁶² And it was in this world that Wordsworth could produce “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798), whereby ‘the imagination, the intellect, the emotions and the actual faculties of sight and hearing come together in a “reading” of the natural world’;⁶³ and Coleridge could produce “Dejection: An Ode” (1802), expressing the judgement that the ‘world of nature can speak to us if and only if we can shape it to an idea, or impression, of our own’.⁶⁴



(Un)theological postscript

There are so many questions raised by Warnock’s lecture topics: What is the status of natural theology today, in the light of Humean and Kantian critiques and their theories of imagination? If one upholds their sceptical stance, might the discipline not be reconfigured in terms of theological imagination? There are contemporary thinkers, such as the radical empiricist philosopher Bas van Fraassen, who agree with Kant that the classic metaphysical arguments for the existence of God do not have any ‘scientific’ value: they do not advance knowledge. But they can function as a conceptual, logical analogue to works of religious art.⁶⁵ Like paintings, which can never demonstrate the truth of their representational content, they can function as internally coherent and reasonable expressions of belief which point towards but never reach, let alone exhaust, the object of faith.

⁶² Warnock, 37.

⁶³ Warnock, 36.

⁶⁴ Warnock, 33.

⁶⁵ See the interview with Robert Lawrence Kuhn in the series *Closer to Truth*, available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxE0RgI8U_o.



Imagining the Gifford Lectures

To what extent might Warnock's discussion of modern European culture, from the poetry of Wordsworth to the novels of Sartre, be read as tempering our impression of the supposed disenchantment of nature within modernity? It seems that the qualitative character of nature, so important theologically before the seventeenth century, was in fact preserved in new forms, over against the exclusively quantitative approach to nature which proved so successful during the Scientific Revolution. Perhaps our artists, including philosophical novelists, have been the most important new additions to the landscape of natural theology. And the insights of the latter are not shut off from traditional metaphysical concerns. When Sartre, in the guise of Roquentin, recoils at the thought of the undifferentiated mass of material being, 'behind the veneer of language and man-made convenience-categories' and he longs for something 'which will persist for ever' in his art (p. 55),⁶⁶ his wish is futile. It is a desire without 'objective correlate', to repurpose a phrase from T. S. Eliot,⁶⁷ so long as it belongs to the world of contingent being, which all art does – all art, that is, contemplated outside a theological metaphysics, where the eternal intersects with the temporal, the infinite with the finite.

Warnock doesn't actually raise any of these issues herself: they come to mind when I read her book. And this brings us back to the question of the nature of natural theology within the Giffords, while reminding us of one of the occasional joys of the live lectures, which obviously cannot be replicated in their written form – I refer, of course, to the audiences' questions. Yes, some of them are thinly disguised monologues; others defy the logic of meaningful discourse; and occasionally they are offensive. But these heavyweight thinkers present themselves to be questioned, and taken out of their comfort zone, by anyone who turns up and secures a seat. And that can make the Giffords a great leveller. Given the opportunity, I might have questioned the lecturer for 1992 on the issues raised above; on the other hand, cynicism may have got the better of me by the time the microphone arrived: 'Baroness Warnock, thank you so much for your lectures. Have you, by any chance, ever considered Duchamp's *Fountain* as a metaphor for natural theology?'

⁶⁶ Warnock, 55.

⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems", in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 55–59: 58.

