

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind

Reviewer name: Scott Main

Book title: The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind

Author name: Anthony Grayling

Genre: History of Ideas

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary:

An infant gurgling in its cot imagines that its nursery constitutes the whole world. The warm breast of its mother exists solely for its nurture. It takes a long series of painful adjustments to comprehend the immense scale of the world and diversity of other human beings, all with their individual motivations and interests which probably conflict with its own. By analogy, human cultures (in their creation myths) held to the warming conviction that we are the centre of the universe, that everything is a stage set for humans to play out our little drama which is watched with the greatest interest by the gods (particularly what we do when naked). In this view, the Earth sits still at the centre of the firmament, whilst the sun tracks daily across the sky giving us heat and light which is its sole purpose. It has taken the human intellect a long series of painful adjustments to admit how infantile these views have been. We are located in an utterly insignificant spot in an immensity of space and time beyond all previous comprehension. Our little lives are a transient dance of molecules unobserved by any mummy, daddy, or audience of gods in the sky. This movement from an infantile world view to a grown up one is the subject of Anthony Grayling's (<http://www.acgrayling.com/>) recent book, 'The Age of Genius: The Seventeenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Mind'. His thesis is that the fundamental intellectual breakthroughs are to be found in the 17th century. An educated audience watching Macbeth at the Globe in 1605 could sincerely believe that regicide was such an aberration of the natural order that ghosts could burst from the ground. By 1649 however, a large crowd, perhaps including some who had seen Macbeth forty-four years earlier, could stand and watch the execution of the King of England. A magus could cast a star chart in 1639, at the same time as Jonathan Horrock and William Crabtree watched the transit of Venus across the face of the sun from their attic. They had successfully tracked its course against Kepler's Tables of Planetary Motion, in a classic case of confirming a scientific theory by empirical testing. It was in this turbulent period that science moved from the alchemy and astrology of John Dee to the painstaking observation and astronomy of Galileo, from the classicism of Aristotle (still endorsed by the Church) to the evidence-based, collegiate investigation of Francis Bacon. The struggles between the old and the new mind set are painful to watch - Descartes's dualism an attempt to square the new philosophy with religious belief; Newton, the man who understood gravity and the laws of motion, still fascinated to the end of his life by alchemy. Nevertheless, by the end of this tumultuous century 'the greatest ever change in the mental outlook of humanity' had irrevocably taken place. Grayling has made it clear that he knows less about The Treaty of Westphalia, The Thirty Years War, The Edict of Restitution, and all the myriad historical detail concerning the 17th century than specialists of that era. He does, however, have a sufficient grasp to support his thesis by reference to the historical detail of that era. You may disagree with the thesis, and argue that the modern world has really been ushered in by Darwinian evolution, the discovery of electro-magnetism, sub-atomic particles, cell biology, or space travel. Take your pick. Whenever the

decisive transition happened, there is no going back to the infant in the cot. This is a greatly educational read, and I commend it to you. Check your local library catalogue or further bibliographic detail here (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Age-Genius-Seventeenth-Century-Modern/dp/0747599424/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1459069900&sr=8-1&keywords=age+of+genius) 368 pages in Bloomsbury First published 2016 ISBN 978-0747599425

What you liked: A brilliant command of historical detail woven into the history of ideas

Who should read this book?: Anyone interested in the history and development of ideas