

Science Illuminated

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*Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the
Mystery of Ourselves* by James Le Fanu
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Dr. James Le Fanu is an M.D. in practice in London who has for many years written a regular column on medicine and health issues for the London *Daily Telegraph*. His book *The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine* won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for science and technology in 2000. He has an enviable and well-deserved reputation for writing lucidly about complex medical and scientific issues and seeing them in a holistic context.

Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Meaning of Ourselves is an important, luminously written book that surveys the landscape of contemporary scientific research and thinking about organic life and its complex subsystems, with special, detailed attention to the findings, dynamics, and implications of the Human Genome Project and the development of PET scanning in brain research. Carefully documented, scrupulously fair-minded, and accompanied by useful diagrams and illustrations, it is an important bridge between “two cultures”: the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the humanities and social

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sciences, on the other. It deserves a very wide readership.

Le Fanu’s main thesis concerns the enormously increased powers and volumes of insight that we now have into the components and dynamics of the physical universe and especially of the biological phenomena within it. A careful reader, analyst, and conveyor of this body of research, and an admirer of its revelations and the ingenuity of those who have made them, Le Fanu is also possessed of something even rarer than a gift for luminous explication of scientific complexity: he has what the great polymathic thinker Blaise Pascal called “l’esprit de finesse,” or a philosophical mind.

Bringing to bear both medical training and a scientific mentality and this philosophical, holistic sensibility, Le Fanu argues what initially seems a great paradox: the extraordinary rhetorical and promotional claims that the new techniques and insights would confirm materialistic expectations about genetics and the brain have been disappointed. The results of genetic research and brain research have, in Le Fanu’s view, undermined materialistic assumptions, leaving the intelligent contemporary observer more puzzled than before. Yet many of the participants in these research projects are extremely reluctant to admit this unexpected and unwelcome conclusion and cling to triumphalist and reductive language that is in clear logical contradiction to their own findings.

Regarding brain research, Le Fanu follows in the current of two of the greatest brain scientists of the twentieth century, the great neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield (1891–1976) and the Nobel laureate Sir John Eccles (1903–1997), in arguing that “cutting-edge” research results should elicit or revive in reflective minds the tradition of mind-brain dualism that, from Plato to Descartes, and long after, seemed

self-evidently accurate to most reflective persons. Le Fanu's book is a worthy successor to *The Wonder of Being Human: Our Brain and Our Mind* (1984) by Eccles and the eminent contemporary psychologist Daniel N. Robinson, but it has the advantage of describing and discussing the intervening quarter century of genetic and brain research.

One of the central epistemological paradoxes and problems remarked by all these writers, as well as by Alfred North Whitehead, Michael Polanyi, C. S. Lewis, and Stanley Jaki, is that as a subset of the rational method, scientific investigation must "bracket" and set aside for its purposes of investigation all nonphysical and nonquantifiable phenomena, but that its own validity presupposes and operationally employs such fundamentally nonempirical phenomena: meaning, truth, purpose, noncontradiction, validity, conceptualization, and language itself. The teaching of the natural sciences since Darwin has been fundamentally vitiated by not making students keenly aware that this initial, usually tacit "bracketing" of nonquantitative phenomena does not—cannot—entail that they do not exist but only that natural science cannot scrutinize them, though its own method depends on them. Thus the necessarily "reductive" method of the natural sciences often unwittingly becomes a very blunt and destructive battering ram for a thoroughgoing, transgressive philosophical-ideological reductionism that is completely self-contradictory and without warrant, but enormously damaging to our culture. Too many scientists, and far more naive science teachers and their students, as Whitehead put it, "are animated by the purpose of proving themselves purposeless." Or, as the Columbia University philosopher Sidney Morgenbesser wittily put it in satirizing the ludicrous, transgressive simplifications of the behaviorist B. F. Skinner

(for seeing humans as "beyond freedom and dignity"): Skinner thinks that "we shouldn't anthropomorphize people."

Le Fanu sees this self-contradictory reductionism as fundamentally deriving from the omniscient claims made for Darwinian "natural selection," a loaded phrase that he has the wisdom to put in quotation marks throughout his book. Granting the accuracy of micro-evolution, he adduces powerful arguments and evidence to show that there are "contradictions, at every turn, in the prevailing scientific certainty of 'natural selection' as the driving force of the Ascent of Man." Like Jacques Barzun, he deplores "that crucial moment in the mid-nineteenth century when science changed the direction of Western society by denying the dual nature of reality, of a material and non-material realm, and asserted instead the priority of its materialist view over the [inherited] philosophic view of the world as we know it to be." Le Fanu's argument is deft and careful here and throughout, but it is reminiscent of the angry reaction a century ago of the great American essayist and moralist John Jay Chapman (1862–1933): "Science after Darwin's time," he wrote, "was seized with a fever of world conquest; its language must dominate. In correct circles it became bad form to use any word that was tinged with theology." Unfortunately, such words included *soul*, *mind*, *free will*, *ethics*, *personal responsibility*, *good and evil*, and even *truth*; not to speak of *dignity* or *sanctity*.

Such an evasion, occlusion, or obliteration (1914–1945) of the central civilized tradition of the West (and of the rest of the world) was only possible because the natural sciences were forced into an unchaste though malignantly fruitful alliance with materialist beliefs and utopian hopes. A "single concept," LeFanu writes, emerged to dominate the "framing of the

modern world: the concept of ‘progress.’” But among the chief collective psychoses that this conception of collective, cumulative, inevitable, and irreversible progress by means of science and technology generated were communist “scientific socialism” and Nazi-Darwinian “racial science.” Commenting on the history of this “brave new world” of the twentieth century, the great German-Jewish émigré philosopher Leo Strauss (1899–1973) has drawn the conclusion and pointed the moral in a formulation that ought to be committed to memory by intellectuals and printed over portals on university campuses and scientific laboratories: “The idea of progress in the modern sense implies that once man has reached a certain level, intellectual and moral or social, there exists a firm level of being, below which he cannot sink. This contention, however, is empirically refuted by the incredible barbarization we have been so unfortunate as to witness in our century.”

Commenting on the “scientistic ideology” that helped make the twentieth century brutal and murderous to a historically unparalleled degree, the English sociologist David Martin wrote forty years ago in defense of precisely the same “qualified dualism” that LeFanu promotes on rational-scientific grounds. This dualism, Martin writes, was traditionally “symbolized either in debate and seminar, or else in

a series of distinctions between church and state, sacrament and material world, body and soul, priest and administrator,” but under the powerfully reductive, monistic assault of scientistic ideology, this dualism is denied and broken down, “simplified”: “Debate must give way to technical committee, seminar to laboratory, and the office of administrator can be merged with that of priest, who then becomes a scientific coordinator.” Thus “religion and politics are both assimilated to science,” and “just as there is no disagreement in science there can be no disagreement in society: hence the government of people may give way to the administration of things.”

James Le Fanu’s illuminating journey through the landscape of contemporary scientific thinking about the universe and the origin, development, and character of organic life shows a sure command and respect for the details of contemporary scientific research, but he is no nominalist overwhelmed by anomalous novelty; he retains a sure grip on the reality of the benign “mysteries” that are humanly primary and rationally indispensable: subjective awareness, free will, the richness and accessibility of memory, human reason and imagination, and the human self or soul itself. He knows, with E. A. Burtt, that “the only way to avoid metaphysics is to say nothing at all”; but instead he has written an excellent book.