

Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Biology

What Functions Explain

Paperback Re-issue

This book offers an examination of functional explanation as it is used in biology and the social sciences, focusing on the kinds of philosophical presuppositions that such explanations carry with them. It tackles such questions as: Why are some things explained functionally while others are not? What do the functional explanations tell us about how these objects are conceptualized? What do we commit ourselves to when we give and take functional explanations in the life sciences and the social sciences?

McLaughlin gives a critical review of the debate on functional explanation in the philosophy of science that has occurred over the last fifty years. He discusses the history of the philosophical question of teleology and provides a comprehensive review of the postwar literature on functional explanation. The question of whether the appeal to natural selection suffices for a naturalistic reconstruction of function ascriptions is also explored.

What Functions Explain provides a sophisticated and detailed analysis of our concept of natural functions and offers a positive contribution to the ongoing debate on the topic. It will be of interest to professionals and students of philosophy, philosophy of science, biology, and sociology.

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