What Functions Explain

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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What Functions Explain
Functional Explanation and Self-Reproducing Systems

PETER McLAUGHLIN
University of Constance
For Lea and David
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Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a number of years of brooding. The first draft of what was to become Parts I and II was written in the fall of 1994, when I was a guest of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. I am grateful to the founding director, Jürgen Renn, and to all the members of the staff for their hospitality and support during that period. One of the most important processes of rethinking began during a year-long visit to the Philosophy Department at the Johns Hopkins University, where I was able to discuss problems and ideas with Peter Achinstein and Karen Neander, neither of whom, however, should be blamed for what they could not prevent.

I would like to thank Michael Ruse for finding two referees willing and able to read with understanding a manuscript with which they could not possibly agree. And I would like to thank those two referees for producing trenchant but constructive criticisms, from which I have benefited greatly.

The penultimate draft of this book was occasioned by a somewhat anachronistic academic ritual called the Habilitation, the German equivalent to a tenure hearing without tenure. However, the only real concession to this academic ritual left in the final version lies in the occasionally overpopulous footnotes and in the bibliography, which contains all the relevant literature I consulted in writing this book, not just those works actually cited. I am grateful to Jürgen Mittelstrass and Gereon Wolters of the Philosophy Department and to Franz Plank of the Linguistics Department, who read the entire draft and provided me with detailed comments and suggestions for improvement.

For the past ten years, I have had the good fortune to be associated with the Center for Philosophy of Science at the University of Constance, and I would like to thank the Center’s Director, Jürgen Mittelstrass, for his constant support of this and previous projects.