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A Many-Colored Glass: Reflections on the Place of Life in the Universe (Page-Barbour Lectures)

Freeman J. Dyson

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Freeman Dyson’s latest book does not attempt to bring together all of the celebrated physicist’s thoughts on science and technology into a unified theory. The emphasis is, instead, on the myriad ways in which the universe presents itself to us--and how, as observers and participants in its processes, we respond to it. "Life, like a dome of many-colored glass," wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley, "stains the white radiance of eternity." The author seeks here to explore the variety that gives life its beauty.

Taken from Dyson’s recent public lectures--delivered to audiences with no specialized knowledge in hard sciences--the book begins with a consideration of the practical and political questions surrounding biotechnology. As he seeks how best to explain the place of life in the universe, Dyson then moves from the ethical to the purely scientific. The book concludes with an attempt to understand the implications of biology for philosophy and religion.

The pieces in this collection touch on numerous disciplines, from astronomy and ecology to neurology and theology, speaking to the lay reader as well as to the scientist. As always, Dyson’s view of human nature and behavior is balanced, and his predictions of a world to come serve primarily as a means for thinking about the world as it is today.

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