

In Our Hurry to Conquer Nature and Death, We Have Made a New Religion of Science

Mind and Matter, Science and Power

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

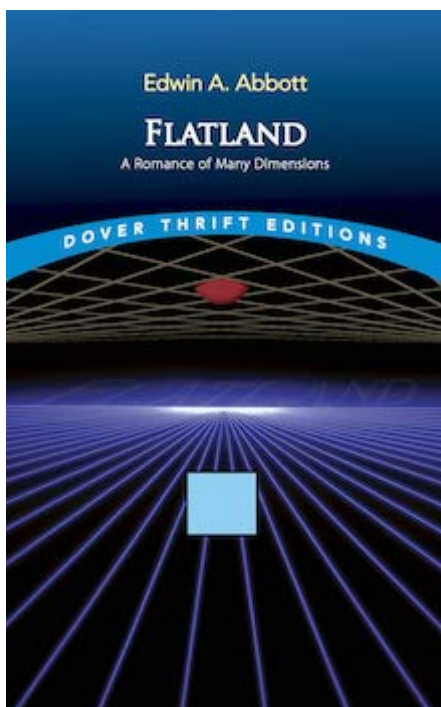
Global Research, April 20, 2021

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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Back in the 1880s, the mathematician and theologian Edwin Abbott tried to help us better understand our world by describing a very different one he called Flatland.

Imagine a world that is not a sphere moving through space like our own planet, but more like a vast sheet of paper inhabited by conscious, flat geometric shapes. These shape-people can move forwards and backwards, and they can turn left and right. But they have no sense of up or down. The very idea of a tree, or a well, or a mountain makes no sense to them because they lack the concepts and experiences of height and depth. They cannot imagine, let alone describe, objects familiar to us.



In this two-dimensional world, the closest scientists can come to comprehending a third dimension are the baffling gaps in measurements that register on their most sophisticated equipment. They sense the shadows cast by a larger universe outside Flatland. The best brains infer that there must be more to the universe than can be observed but they have no

way of knowing what it is they don't know.

This sense of the the unknowable, the ineffable has been with humans since our earliest ancestors became self-conscious. They inhabited a world of immediate, cataclysmic events – storms, droughts, volcanoes and earthquakes – caused by forces they could not explain. But they also lived with a larger, permanent wonder at the mysteries of nature itself: the change from day to night, and the cycle of the seasons; the pin-pricks of light in the night sky, and their continual movement; the rising and falling of the seas; and the inevitability of life and death.

Perhaps not surprisingly, our ancestors tended to attribute common cause to these mysterious events, whether of the catastrophic or the cyclical variety, whether of chaos or order. They ascribed them to another world or dimension – to the spiritual realm, to the divine.

Paradox and mystery

Science has sought to shrink the realm of the inexplicable. We now understand – at least approximately – the laws of nature that govern the weather and catastrophic events like an earthquake. Telescopes and rocket-ships have also allowed us to probe deeper into the heavens to make a little more sense of the universe outside our tiny corner of it.

But the more we investigate the universe the more rigid appear the limits to our knowledge. Like the shape-people of Flatland, our ability to understand is constrained by the dimensions we can observe and experience: in our case, the three dimensions of space and the additional one of time. Influential “string theory” posits another six dimensions, though we would be unlikely to ever sense them in any more detail than the shadows almost-detected by the scientists of Flatland.

The deeper we peer into the big universe of the night sky and our cosmic past, and the deeper we peer into the small universe inside the atom and our personal past, the greater the sense of mystery and wonder.

At the sub-atomic level, the normal laws of physics break down. Quantum mechanics is a best-guess attempt to explain the mysteries of movement of the tiniest particles we can observe, which appear to be operating, at least in part, in a dimension we cannot observe directly.

And most cosmologists, looking outwards rather inwards, have long known that there are questions we are unlikely ever to answer: not least what exists outside our universe – or expressed another way, what existed before the Big Bang. For some time, dark matter and black holes have baffled the best minds. This month scientists conceded to the New York Times that there are forms of matter and energy unknown to science but which can be inferred because they disrupt the known laws of physics.

Inside and outside the atom, our world is full of paradox and mystery.

Breaking News: Evidence is mounting that a tiny subatomic particle is being influenced by forms of matter and energy that are not yet known to science but which may nevertheless affect the nature and evolution of the universe.
<https://t.co/8cwwhlPCOe>

Conceit and humility

Despite our science-venerating culture, we have arrived at a similar moment to our forebears, who gazed at the night sky in awe. We have been forced to acknowledge the boundaries of knowledge.

There is a difference, however. Our ancestors feared the unknowable, and therefore preferred to show caution and humility in the face of what could not be understood. They treated the ineffable with respect and reverence. Our culture encourages precisely the opposite approach. We show only conceit and arrogance. We seek to defeat, ignore or trivialise that which we cannot explain or understand.

The greatest scientists do not make this mistake. As an avid viewer of science programmes like the BBC's Horizon, I am always struck by the number of cosmologists who openly speak of their religious belief. Carl Sagan, the most famous cosmologist, never lost his sense of awestruck wonder as he examined the universe. Outside the lab, his was not the language of hard, cold, calculating science. He described the universe in the language of poetry. He understood the necessary limits of science. Rather than being threatened by the universe's mysteries and paradoxes, he celebrated them.

When in 1990, for example, space probe Voyager 1 showed us for the first time our planet from 6 billion km away, Sagan did not mistake himself or his fellow NASA scientists for gods. He saw "a pale blue dot" and [marvelled](#) at a planet reduced to a "mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam". Humility was his response to the vast scale of the universe, our fleeting place within it, and our struggle to grapple with "the great enveloping cosmic dark".

Mind and matter

Sadly, Sagan's approach is not the one that dominates the western tradition. All too often, we behave as if we are gods. Foolishly, we have made a religion of science. We have forgotten that in a world of unknowables, the application of science is necessarily tentative and ideological. It is a tool, one of many that we can use to understand our place in the universe, and one that is easily appropriated by the corrupt, by the vain, by those who seek power over others, by those who worship money.

Until relatively recently, science, philosophy and theology sought to investigate the same mysteries and answer the same existential questions. Through much of history, they were seen as complementary, not in competition. Abbott, remember, was a mathematician and theologian, and Flatland was his attempt to explain the nature of faith. Similarly, the man who has perhaps most shaped the paradigm within which much western science still operates was a French philosopher using the scientific methods of the time to prove the existence of God.

Today, Rene Descartes is best remembered for his famous – if rarely understood – dictum: "I think, therefore I am." Four hundred years ago, he believed he could prove God's existence through his argument that mind and matter are separate. Just as human bodies were distinct from souls, so God was separate and distinct from humans. Descartes believed

knowledge was innate, and therefore our idea of a perfect being, of God, could only derive from something that was perfect and objectively real outside us.

Weak and self-serving as many of his arguments sound today, Descartes' lasting ideological influence on western science was profound. Not least so-called Cartesian dualism – the treatment of mind and matter as separate realms – has encouraged and perpetuated a mechanistic view of the world around us.

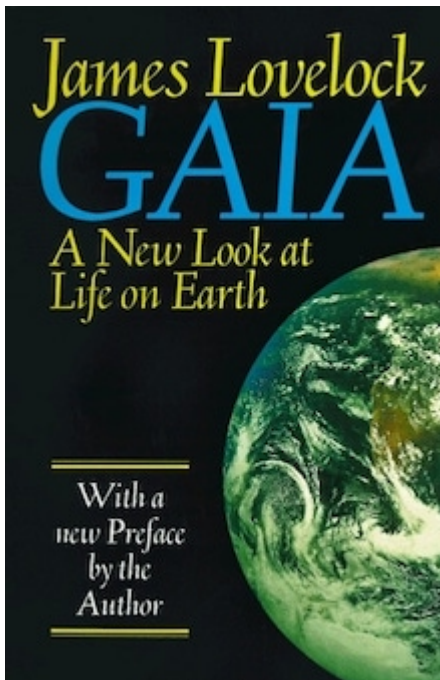
We can briefly grasp how strong the continuing grip of his thinking is on us when we are confronted with more ancient cultures that have resisted the west's extreme rationalist discourse – in part, we should note, because they were exposed to it in hostile, oppressive ways that served only to alienate them from the western canon.

Hearing a Native American or an Australian Aboriginal speak of the sacred significance of a river or a rock – or about their ancestors – is to become suddenly aware of how alien their thinking sounds to our “modern” ears. It is the moment when we are likely to respond in one of two ways: either to smirk internally at their childish ignorance, or to gulp at a wisdom that seems to fill a yawning emptiness in our own lives.

Science and power

Descartes' legacy – a dualism that assumes separation between soul and body, mind and matter – has in many ways proved a poisonous one for western societies. An impoverished, mechanistic worldview treats both the planet and our bodies primarily as material objects: one a plaything for our greed, the other a canvas for our insecurities.

The British scientist James Lovelock who helped model conditions on Mars for NASA so it would have a better idea how to build the first probes to land there, is still ridiculed for the Gaia hypothesis he developed in the 1970s. He understood that our planet was best not viewed as a very large lump of rock with life-forms living on it, though distinct from it. Rather Earth was as a complete, endlessly complex, delicately balanced living entity. Over billions of years, life had grown more sophisticated, but each species, from the most primitive to the most advanced, was vital to the whole, maintaining a harmony that sustained the diversity.



Few listened to Lovelock. Our god-complex got the better of us. And now, as the bees and other insects disappear, everything he warned of decades ago seems far more urgent. Through our arrogance, we are destroying the conditions for advanced life. If we don't stop soon, the planet will dispose of us and return to an earlier stage of its evolution. It will begin again, without us, as simple flora and microbes once again begin recreating gradually – measured in aeons – the conditions favourable to higher life forms.

But the abusive, mechanistic relationship we have with our planet is mirrored by the one we have with our bodies and our health. Dualism has encouraged us to think of our bodies as fleshy vehicles, which like the metal ones need regular outside intervention, from a service to a respray or an upgrade. The pandemic has only served to underscore these unwholesome tendencies.

In part, the medical establishment, like all establishments, has been corrupted by the desire for power and enrichment. Science is not some pristine discipline, free from real-world pressures. Scientists need funding for research, they have mortgages to pay, and they crave status and career advancement like everyone else.

Kamran Abbasi, executive editor of the British Medical Journal, wrote an [editorial](#) last November warning of British state corruption that had been unleashed on a grand scale by covid-19. But it was not just politicians responsible. Scientists and health experts had been implicated too: “The pandemic has revealed how the medical-political complex can be manipulated in an emergency.”

He added: “The UK’s pandemic response relies too heavily on scientists and other government appointees with worrying competing interests, including shareholdings in companies that manufacture covid-19 diagnostic tests, treatments, and vaccines.”

Things like this raise an obvious question we have been ignoring at our peril:

How do we trust an entirely commercially driven world in which a small group of people who constantly enrich themselves also control the information universe the rest of us inhabit?

Doctors and clerics

But in some ways Abbasi is too generous. Scientists haven't only corrupted science by prioritising their personal, political and commercial interests. Science itself is shaped and swayed by the ideological assumptions of scientists and the wider societies to which they belong. For centuries, Descartes' dualism has provided the lens through which scientists have often developed and justified medical treatments and procedures. Medicine has its fashions too, even if they tend to be longer-lived – and more dangerous – than the ones of the clothing industry.

In fact, there were self-interested reasons why Descartes's dualism was so appealing to the scientific and medical community four centuries ago. His mind-matter division carved out a space for science free from clerical interference. Doctors could now claim an authority over our bodies separate from that claimed by the Church over our souls.

But the mechanistic view of health has been hard to shake off, even as scientific understanding – and exposure to non-western medical traditions – should have made it seem ever less credible. Cartesian dualism reigns to this day, seen in the supposedly strict separation of physical and mental health. To treat the mind and body as indivisible, as two sides of the same coin, is to risk being accused of quackery. "Holistic" medicine still struggles to be taken seriously.

Faced with a fear-inducing pandemic, the medical establishment has inevitably reverted even more strongly to type. The virus has been viewed through a single lens: as an invader seeking to overwhelm our defences, while we are seen as vulnerable patients in desperate need of an extra battalion of soldiers who can help us to fight it off. With this as the dominant framework, it has fallen to Big Pharma – the medical corporations with the greatest firepower – to ride to our rescue.

Vaccines are part of an emergency solution, of course. They will help save lives among the most vulnerable. But the reliance on vaccines, to the exclusion of everything else, is a sign that once again we are being lured back to viewing our bodies as machines. We are being told by the medical establishment we can ride out this war with some armour-plating from Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca. We can all be Robocop in the battle against Covid-19.

Pfizer claims people will likely need a third dose of its Covid-19 vaccine within six to 12 months of receiving the first two doses.

CEO Albert Bourla says, from then on, it is also possible that people may require annual booster shots. pic.twitter.com/Ki9nVLVg7v

— BFM News (@NewsBFM) [April 17, 2021](#)

But there are others ways to view health than as an expensive, resource-depleting technological battle against virus-warriors. Where is the focus on improving the ever-more nutrient-deficient, processed, pesticide-laden, and sugar and chemical-rich diets most of us consume? How do we address the plague of stress and anxiety we all endure in a

competitive, digitally connected, no-rest world stripped of all spiritual meaning? What do we do about the cosseted lifestyles we prefer, where exertion is a lifestyle choice renamed as exercise rather than integral to our working day, and where regular [exposure to sunshine](#), outside of a beach vacation, is all but impossible in our office-bound schedules?

Fear and quick-fixes

For much of human history, our chief concern was the fight for survival – against animals and other humans, against the elements, against natural disasters. Technological developments proved invaluable in making our lives safer and easier, whether it was flint axes and domesticated animals, wheels and combustion engines, medicines and mass communications. Our brains now seem hardwired to look to technological innovation to address even the smallest inconvenience, to allay even our wildest fears.

So, of course, we have invested our hopes, and sacrificed our economies, in finding a technological fix to the pandemic. But does this exclusive fixation on technology to solve the current health crisis not have a parallel with the similar, quick-fix technological remedies we keep seeking for the many ecological crises we have created?

Whitest-ever paint could help cool heating Earth, study shows
<https://t.co/3EjU6feKh6>

— The Guardian (@guardian) [April 15, 2021](#)

Global warming? We can create an even [whiter paint](#) to reflect back the sun's heat. Plastics in every corner of our oceans? We can build giant [vacuum-cleaners](#) that will suck it all out. Vanishing bee populations? We can invent [pollinator drones](#) to take their place. A dying planet? Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk will fly millions of us to [space colonies](#).

Were we not so technology obsessed, were we not so greedy, were we not so terrified of insecurity and death, if we did not see our bodies and minds as separate, and humans as separate from everything else, we might pause to ponder whether our approach is not a little misguided.

Science and technology can be wonderful things. They can advance our knowledge of ourselves and the world we inhabit. But they need to be conducted with a sense of humility we increasingly seem incapable of. We are not conquerors of our bodies, or the planet, or the universe – and if we imagine we are, we will soon find out that the battle we are waging is one we can never hope to win.

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This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed

Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: People hold signs during the March for Science in Melbourne, Australia on April 22, 2017. (Photo: Takver/flickr/cc)

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