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The Trouble With String Theory
IT'S CLAPTRAP, A NEW BOOK ARGUES.
By Gregg Easterbrook
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The leading universities are dominated by hooded monks who speak in impenetrable mumbo-jumbo; insist on the existence of fantastic mystical forces, yet can produce no evidence of these forces; and enforce a rigid guild structure of beliefs in order to maintain their positions and status. The Middle Ages? No, the current situation in university physics departments. I just invented the part about the hoods.

The upper rungs of the particle-physics faculties at Princeton, Stanford, and elsewhere in the academy are today heavy with advocates of "string theory," a proposed explanation for the existence of the universe. String theory seeks to explain why, at the very minute scale, matter appears to be constructed from vibrating nothing. Smash up subatomic particles into smaller units such as quarks, and the quarks don't appear to have content—puzzling, to say the least. String theory says that these seemingly amorphous infinitesimal aspects of matter are made from other dimensions, compressed to a smallness that strains imagination. In various versions, the theory also seeks to explain how the Big Bang could have been possible, to reconcile the extremely tiny realm of quantum mechanics with the cosmic kingdom of general relativity, and to answer whether the expansion of our universe will stop or continue forever.

Important stuff! But string theory works only if you assume the existence of other dimensions—nine, 11, or 25 of them, depending on your flavor of string thinking—and there's not one shred of evidence other dimensions exist. This may render string theory highfalutin nonsense that has hijacked academic physics. Such is the thesis of The Trouble With Physics, a compelling new book by Lee Smolin, among the leading physicists of the day. Smolin's is the most important book about cosmology since Steven Weinberg's 1977 volume The First Three Minutes. If you worry that even in the 21st century, intellectual fads have as much to do with university politics and careerism as with the search for abstract truth, The Trouble With Physics is a book you absolutely must read. "String theory now has such a dominant position in the academy that it is practically career suicide for young theoretical physicists not to join the field," Smolin writes. Yet since string theory became ascendant about three decades ago, "there has not been a single genuine breakthrough in understanding of elementary particle physics." Not only is string theory rife with malarkey about imperceptible dimensions, Smolin fears, it may be holding back legitimate science.
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