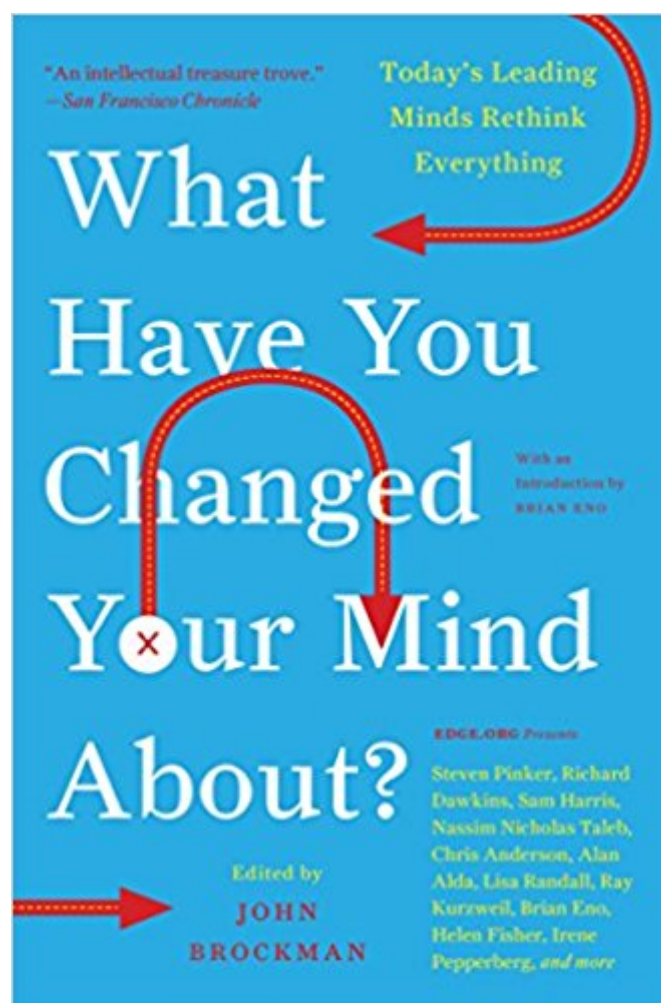




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What Have You Changed Your Mind About?: Today's Leading Minds Rethink Everything (Edge Question Series)



Synopsis

Even geniuses change their minds sometimes. Edge (www.edge.org), the influential online intellectual salon, recently asked 150 high-powered thinkers to discuss their most telling missteps and reconsiderations: What have you changed your mind about? The answers are brilliant, eye-opening, fascinating, sometimes shocking, and certain to kick-start countless passionate debates. Steven Pinker on the future of human evolution – Richard Dawkins on the mysteries of courtship – SAM HARRIS on the indifference of Mother Nature – Nassim Nicholas Taleb on the irrelevance of probability – Chris Anderson on the reality of global warming – Alan Alda on the existence of God – Ray Kurzweil on the possibility of extraterrestrial life – Brian Eno on what it means to be a "revolutionary" – Helen Fisher on love, fidelity, and the viability of marriage – Irene Pepperberg on learning from parrots . . . and many others.

Book Information

File Size: 1077 KB

Print Length: 419 pages

Publisher: HarperCollins e-books (January 6, 2009)

Publication Date: October 6, 2009

Sold by: Amazon HarperCollins Publishers

Language: English

ASIN: B001NLKTZG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,288 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Essays & Commentary #2 in Books > Science & Math > Essays & Commentary

Customer Reviews

I keep reading reviews of how provocative these essays are, and my only response to these people is: you need to get out more--or maybe stay inside and read more books. While there are some

good reads in the collection, the vast majority of these essays retread familiar themes from the choir of new-Atheist intellectuals (there is no god; yea, science!; beware, climate change). Before a new-atheist jumps out of a laboratory and assaults me: I am not claiming that the ideas in the book are inferior or wrong, only that there is very little here that is surprising, provocative, or different from anything I've read from these folks before. One would think these qualities would be especially apparent in a book titled, "What Have You Changed Your Mind About?" Anthologies like this are a great introduction to some wonderful contemporary thinkers for the uninitiated, and I particularly enjoyed the essays from Joseph Ledoux, Nicholas Carr, Ray Kurzweil, Nick Bostrom, Donald Hoffman, Timothy Taylor, Robert Sapolsky, Tor Norretranders, Helen Fisher, Linda Stone, Alison Gopnik, and Jamsheed Bharucha. But be warned--even for those who are unfamiliar with these thinkers, there is an irritating rhythm of self-righteousness and in-group thinking that beats through this book, and it quickly becomes tiresome.

This is a very interesting book with a lot of creative ideas by a lot of creative people. Of course, in a book of this type the writing is somewhat variable in readability since all people, especially scientists do not write well. Several write in such obscure language that, unless you are an expert in their field, you probably won't get much out of it. Nevertheless, the good writers provide a wealth of ideas and make the book more than valuable to make you think.

Each book in this series has a sizable number of (supposed) great thinkers responding to the same (supposedly) provocative question. Of the three books I've seen, this one contains the fewest interesting responses, and I lost interest about half way through

This is the fourth of John Brockman's books that I have read and reviewed, and I think the best. Previously Brockman asked scientists, What do you believe but cannot prove?, What's your dangerous idea?, and What are you optimistic about? Here he asks scientist the title question, What have you changed your mind about? I think this question energized the 150 respondents and made the responses most interesting. What Princeton Professor Lee M. Silver has changed his mind about is the effectiveness of modern education to get humans to reject supernatural beliefs or "to accept scientific implications of rational argumentation." What he has discovered over the years is that "irrationality and mysticism seem to be an integral part of normal human nature." (pp. 144-146) Well, I've noticed the same thing and so have a lot of other people. The question is why should our minds be in such a sorry state? The broad answer is evolution made them that way because that was what

worked. Irrationality works? Strange to say, but sometimes it does--or has. Since even the most rational of our prehistoric ancestors could not know when the tsunami was coming or how to avoid drought and disease, rational thinking had a limited applicability. In some cases more value was to be found in certain rituals and mumbled words that gave our ancestors heart and allowed them to avoid despair. The problem with this is that in the modern world, with the power of science and our knowledge of history to guide us, we would be much better off if we were able to throw off the irrationality and work together toward logical and informed solutions to our problems. Cosmologist and President of the Royal Society, Martin Rees used to believe that the fairly distant future ought to be "best left to speculative academics and cosmologists." Now, with rapid acceleration in cultural evolution that we are experiencing, he feels that "We are custodians of a 'posthuman future'--here on Earth and perhaps beyond--that cannot just be left to writers of science fiction." (pp. 29-31)

Laurence C. Smith, Professor of Geology at UCLA used to think that the effects of global warming would be gradual, but now he believes that such effects, both positive and negative" may already be upon us." He cites the rapidity with which the Arctic Ocean is becoming ice-free for changing his mind. He notes that "Over the past three years, experts have shifted from 2050 to 2035 to 2013 as plausible dates for an ice-free Arctic Ocean..." "Reality," it appears, is revising the models. (pp. 141-143)

J. Craig Venter, human genome decoder, used to believe that "solving the carbon-fuel problem was for future generations and that the big concern was the limited supply of oil, not the rate of adding carbon to the atmosphere." Now he believes greenhouse gas emissions could result in "catastrophic changes" more quickly than previously imagined, and that "we are conducting a dangerous experiment with our planet. One that we need to stop." (pp. 139-140)

Physicist Lee Smolin has changed his mind about time. Originally he believed that (quantum) reality is timeless. Then he came to believe that "time, as causality, is real." Now he writes, "Rather than being an illusion, time may be the only aspect of our present understanding of nature that is not temporary and emergent." (pp. 148-149)

I am not sure what kind of distinction Smolin is making between a reality that is timeless and one in which time is causality. I think that in both instances time does not exist and is, as Smolin reports, "an illusion" that some philosophers and physicists believe "is just an 'emergent quantity' that is helpful in organizing our observations..." (p. 147)

What I think would be helpful is to realize that causality is the ordering of events with no concept of "time" needed. We say that event A occurred "before" event B as though having reference to "time," but this is just a verbalism. Notice that we also say that the numeral 2 appears "before" the numeral 3 or "after" the numeral 1 in an ordering. Again time is not involved.

Physicist Lawrence Krauss used to believe that the universe was flat. Now he thinks it will go on expanding

forever. (pp. 159-161) Richard Wrangham, author of excellent "Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence," now believes it was cooking that transformed us from Homo habilis through Homo erectus to Homo sapiens and not meat-eating. He now believes that erectus used fire although clear proof is still lacking. (pp. 242-244) Steve Connor, Science Editor of The Independent, now sees the 21st century bringing horrors worse than the Holocaust and nuclear proliferation. The culprits? "[G]lobal warming and the inexorable growth in the human population" leading to a stampede by the four horsemen of the apocalypse. He believes that the IPCC is underestimating the pace and extent of global warming. (pp. 327-330) Richard Dawkins has changed his mind about Amotz Zahavi's "handicap principle" in evolutionary biology. (pp. 335-338) Dawkins's change of heart seems somewhat reluctant however and is, judging by the entry in this book, applicable to only the sexual selection aspect of the handicap principle. Dawkins allows that yes, superior male animals like the peacock may take on the handicap of appendages or behaviors that put them in increased danger just so they can "say" to the opposite sex: "See how fit I am. I can carry around his otherwise useless and heavy tail and still make a good living. Reproduce with me!" But Dawkins does not mention the predator-prey aspect of Zahavi's handicap principle, such as the springbok pronking (jumping up and down conspicuously) to demonstrate to predators its fitness, "saying," "Don't waste your energy chasing me. I am too fit for you to catch." What I would like to see Dawkins change his mind about is group selection. He has allowed that group selection may be a (small) factor in evolution in some instances. What he needs to acknowledge is that selection occurs at various levels from the gene on up. There is much, much more in this fascinating book. Don't miss it. (Note: The following books by Dennis Littrell are now available at .com: Yoga: Sacred and Profane (Beyond Hatha Yoga) Dennis Littrell's True Crime Companion Novels and other Fictions Cut to the Chaise Lounge or I Can't Believe I Swallowed the Remote! The Holon Teddy and Teri High School from Hell Let's Play Overkill! Like a Tsunami Headed for Hilo Understanding Evolution and Ourselves Coming soon: The World Is Not as We Think It Is) Now available at :The World Is Not as We Think It Is

Most non-fiction books are written to advance a thesis; to present a conclusion, a theory which explains the facts. When you realize that you've got something wrong, that you have to change your mind, it's natural to be somewhat restrained about the fact. After all, we live in a society that demands certainty - however absurd that expectation may be - and castigates people as "flip-floppers". I think that we could all benefit from reading about how thoughtful men and women were humble and open enough to admit that they were wrong. Oh sure, this is a mixed bag. There

are a few essays where you get to the end and scratch your head, wondering whatever happened to the purported change. But most are excellent. There are some obvious common themes: cosmology, evolution, climate change, science and religion, gender, consciousness. It seems intuitively obvious that these big questions which have both a scientific and a societal dimension will be associated with skepticism and revision. Any reader of a book like this is going to be faced with the personal question: what have I changed my mind about? Well, 10 years ago I was in the computational neuroscience camp: I thought that the Churchlands had got most of it right. Somewhere along the way, I realized that biology, from the simplest plants to the most cerebral animals, was actually based on information systems. I'm not talking about computers as metaphors for brains, or anything like that; I mean that at some, very early point, the self-replicating information patterns co-opted and started to organize the material substrates of life.

Interesting overview of very short "answers" to the title question, from a variety of scientists/experts. I didn't find in it anything that surprised me too much, but it's a good overview of "hot topics" in modern science. You can find it all at the Edge website.

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