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This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress (Edge Question Series)



Synopsis

The bestselling editor of *This Explains Everything* brings together 175 of the world's most brilliant minds to tackle Edge.org's 2014 question: What scientific idea has become a relic blocking human progress? Each year, John Brockman, publisher of Edge.org "•The world's smartest website" (The Guardian) "challenges some of the world's greatest scientists, artists, and philosophers to answer a provocative question crucial to our time. In 2014 he asked 175 brilliant minds to ponder: What scientific idea needs to be put aside in order to make room for new ideas to advance? The answers are as surprising as they are illuminating. In : Steven Pinker dismantles the working theory of human behavior Richard Dawkins renounces essentialism Sherry Turkle reevaluates our expectations of artificial intelligence Geoffrey West challenges the concept of a "Theory of Everything" Andrei Linde suggests that our universe and its laws may not be as unique as we think Martin Rees explains why scientific understanding is a limitless goal Nina Jablonski argues to rid ourselves of the concept of race Alan Guth rethinks the origins of the universe Hans Ulrich Obrist warns against glorifying unlimited economic growth and much more. Profound, engaging, thoughtful, and groundbreaking, *This Idea Must Die* will change your perceptions and understanding of our world today . . . and tomorrow.

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Customer Reviews

I knew it was micro-essays, but you'd think that they could at least have a bit more content to them. Most of them felt like they were written as a half-baked ramble that slipped out after a dinner party in which the author drank too much wine and received too much encouragement. The claim that STEM majors need more liberal arts background is all too apparent in this compilation, as many of the essays were almost incomprehensible or stale (even at 3 pages!). However, I did thoroughly enjoy Jared Diamond's pokes at the very question Edge.org posed, and Nowak's sore jab at "the cult" of inclusive fitness researchers (if you don't know about that whole fiasco with the petition against his work, it's a juicy piece of scientist poo-flinging). I still like the idea. It is a conflicting set of teasers of "well-supported" opinions from scientists in diverse disciplines, aka an Ivy League Scientist gossip mag. Or, rather, it's a snippet of 175 scientists' views, allowing one to decide whether or not to completely avoid that scientist or follow up on their work. Daniel Goleman still pisses me off, and it's nice to have that affirmed after 10 years, for example. Overall, 3 stars. Mostly because it entertained me for the evening and gave me a few scientists to look into. Yet what sounded like insightful criticisms of paradigms fell very flat most of the time, and nothing really knocked my socks off, so I didn't learn as much as I'd hoped I would.

John Brockton was an early participant in the TED conferences, which started out as a series of thoughtful inquiries at the edge of science, but which have morphed into a sort of semi-scientific Moth show, in which people from science, politics, and show business present shallow, preferably heart-warming tales with an often tenuous connection to science. Benjamin Bratton called TED "middlebrow megachurch infotainment" which I think sums it up well. Brockman also regularly (every six months or so) releases a volume of essays that also purport to be deep intellectual works, but are typically (but not always) short, shallow, essays in the same mold as the TED talks, and that can be skimmed through without too much thought. Some of the ideas found in this book are thoughtful, and worth pondering; some are so oversimplified as to be worthless. In the former group I'd put Max Tegmark's essay on infinities, which, at 4 pages in length, is one of the longer essays in the book. In the second, Michael Shermer's essay, which seems to be simultaneously displaying the author's lack of knowledge who tilting at windmills. Many are not arguments, just opinions or argument without evidence. The opening essay, in which Geoffrey West argues against the search for a grand unification, consists of three pages of history, and an argument presented in one assertion: The

dynamics of complex systems are too complicated to be encompassed in one equation, or even a finite number of equations. Well, perhaps; but merely asserting that doesn't help the reader understand it.

This Idea Must Die: Scientific Theories That Are Blocking Progress (Edge Question Series) by John Brockman
"This Idea Must Die" is the thought-provocative book of scientific essays brought to you by The Edge. The Edge is an organization that presents original ideas by today's leading thinkers from a wide spectrum of scientific fields. The 2014 Edge question is, "What scientific idea is ready for retirement?" This interesting 592-page book provides over 175 short essays that address the question. The quality of the essays in this book range from a few one-star duds to a handful of outstanding 5-star essays. For my sake, I created a spreadsheet of all the essays and graded them from zero to five stars based on overall quality. A quality essay to me is well written, interesting, addresses the topic and either teaches me something new or uses the best of our current knowledge effectively. On the other hand, those receiving two or fewer stars represent essays that were not worthy of this book. Of course, this is just one reviewer's personal opinion.

Positives:

1. Generally well-written, succinct essays. High quality-value. I'm a fan of the Edge Series.
2. An excellent question, "What established scientific idea is ready to be moved aside so that science can advance?"
3. You don't have to read the essays in order.
4. This is well-balanced book, covers the question from many scientific angles and perspectives.
5. There were a number of outstanding essays. The following fifteen outstanding essays met my aforementioned standards and are worthy of five stars, starting with: "The Big Bang was the first moment of time" by Lee Smolin.

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