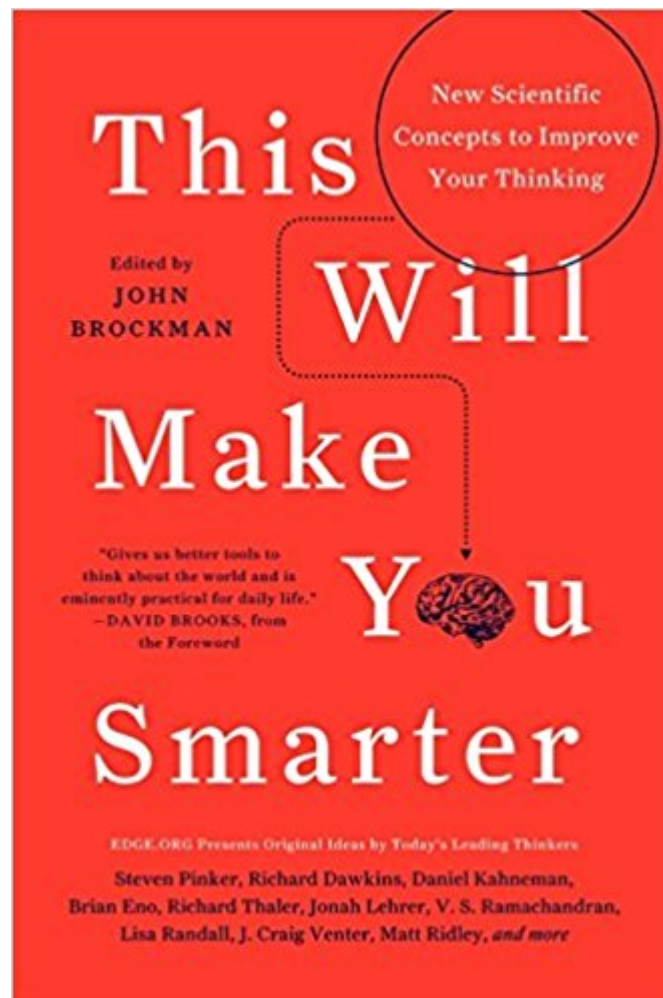




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# This Will Make You Smarter: New Scientific Concepts To Improve Your Thinking (Edge Question Series)



## Synopsis

Edge.org presents brilliant, accessible, cutting-edge ideas to improve our decision-making skills and improve our cognitive toolkits, with contributions by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Richard Dawkins, Brian Eno, Steven Pinker, and more. Featuring a foreword by New York Times columnist David Brooks and edited by John Brockman, *This Will Make You Smarter* presents some of the best wisdom from today's leading thinkers to make better thinkers out of the leaders of tomorrow.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“This Will Make You Smarter gives us better tools to think about the world and is eminently practical for life day to day. The people in this book lead some of the hottest fields.” • (DAVID BROOKS, from the Foreword) “The world's smartest website ... Edge is a salon for the world's finest minds” • (The Guardian) “Edge.org has become an epicenter of bleeding-edge insight across science, technology and beyond, hosting conversations with some of our era's greatest thinkers” • (Atlantic Monthly) “A winning combination of good writers, good science and serious broader concerns.” • (KIRKUS REVIEWS (starred review))

Featuring a foreword by David Brooks, *This Will Make You Smarter* presents brilliant—but accessible—ideas to expand every mind. What scientific concept would improve everybody's cognitive toolkit? This is the question John Brockman, publisher of Edge.org, posed to the

world's most influential thinkers. Their visionary answers flow from the frontiers of psychology, philosophy, economics, physics, sociology, and more. Surprising and enlightening, these insights will revolutionize the way you think about yourself and the world. Daniel Kahneman on the focusing illusion • Jonah Lehrer on controlling attention • Richard Dawkins on experimentation • Aubrey De Grey on conquering our fear of the unknown • Martin Seligman on the ingredients of well-being • Nicholas Carr on managing cognitive load • Steven Pinker on win-win negotiating • Daniel C. Dennett on benefiting from cycles • Jaron Lanier on resisting delusion • Frank Wilczek on the brain's hidden layers • Clay Shirky on the 80/20 rule • Daniel Goleman on understanding our connection to the natural world • V. S. Ramachandran on paradigm shifts • Matt Ridley on tapping collective intelligence • John McWhorter on path dependence • Lisa Randall on effective theorizing • Brian Eno on ecological vision • Richard Thaler on rooting out false concepts • J. Craig Venter on the multiple possible origins of life • Helen Fisher on temperament • Sam Harris on the flow of thought • Lawrence Krauss on living with uncertainty

The origin of this book is a simple one: The editor, John Brockman, tossed out the question "What scientific concept would improve everybody's cognitive toolkit?" to over 150 contemporary thought leaders, and recorded the results. Brockman has worked for decades to bring thinkers together, under the premise that great things happen when cross-disciplinary exchanges of brilliant thinking take place. Bacteria, because they are so profligate in exchanging genetic information across species, are astoundingly capable of arriving at new and adaptive solutions to environmental (including antibiotics) challenges. Brockman, I'm guessing, would be comfortable with the notion that in posing annual questions to leaders in the fields of many different disciplines he is increasing the adaptability, creativity, and problem solving capabilities of the human race. This Will Make You Smarter is excellent evidence that he may well be correct. Bacteria have something to teach us. Almost everyone gets a say here: astrophysicists, sociologists, environmentalists, historians, microbiologists, newspaper columnists, particle physicists, philosophers, and a host of notables in other disciplines. The result is a truly provocative treasure heap of notions that just might do what the title of the book claims. The book is a bucket of pearls: succinct (for the most part!) notions with real punch are the order of the day. John Brockman's website, Edge.org, aims to represent cutting edge ideas, and the included authors often are forced to create neologisms or resurrect arcane vocabulary (e.g. Interbeing and apophenia) to express their thoughts fully. This book is not a quick read. I left it at my bedside and knocked off a few every evening, often with a new concept, or an

improved version of an old one, caroming around the confines of my cranium as I drifted off to sleep. Some ideas seemed both verbose and obtuse. Most seemed refreshing and useful. My favorite was also the shortest of all the selections, almost haiku like in intensity. In its entirety, here is Susan Fiske's (Princeton Professor of Psychology) essay: "The most important scientific concept is that an assertion is often an empirical question settled by collecting evidence. The plural of anecdote is not data, and the plural of opinion is not facts. Quality peer-reviewed scientific evidence accumulates into knowledge. People's stories are stories, and fiction keeps us going. But science should settle policy." As several previous reviewers have noted, this book is available free online at [Edge.org](http://Edge.org). Why spend ten bucks? There is one reason that you might want to consider: it's a book that you'll savage with your pen, assaulting the pages with highlighter ink, filling the margins with thoughts, and littering the essays with circles and exclamation marks. You'll pull it down off your bookshelf regularly, every time you want tangible evidence in your hands that human beings do, on occasion, have some REALLY good ideas.

150 short essays. Some of them worthy of 10 stars, some - only of 1. If you are willing to invest some time and effort in order to search for real jewels, then definitely read this book! The most useful ideas/concepts for me: 1) a keener awareness that for the Universe "far more time lies ahead than has elapsed until now." "There is abundant time for posthuman evolution, here on Earth or far beyond, organic or inorganic, to give rise to far more diversity and even greater qualitative changes than those that have led from single-celled organisms to humans." "So humans are surely not the terminal branch of an evolutionary tree but a species that emerged early in cosmic history, with special promise for diverse evolution." [Martin Rees] 2) "the history of life on Earth doesn't support this evolution toward intelligence [...] Play the movie differently and we wouldn't be here [...]" [Marcelo Gleiser] 3) "No matter the domain of life, one's generation's verities so often become the next generation's falsehoods that we might as well have a pessimistic meta-induction from the history of everything. Good scientists understand this. They recognize that they are part of a long process of approximation. They know they are constructing models rather than revealing reality. [...] The idea behind the meta-induction is that all of our theories are fundamentally provisional and quite possibly wrong. If we can add that idea to our cognitive toolkit, we will be able to listen with curiosity and empathy to those whose theories contradict our own. We will be better able to pay attention to counterevidence - those anomalous bits of data that make our picture of the world a little weirder, more mysterious, less clean, less done." [Kathryn Shulz] 4) "Cognitive machinery guides us to think in terms of THE cause - of an outcome's having a single cause. Yet for enlarged understanding, it is

more accurate to represent outcomes as caused by an intersection, or nexus, of factors (including the absence of precluding conditions.) [...] "The complexity and noise permeating any real causal nexus generates a fog of uncertainty. Slight biases in causal attribution or in blameworthiness allow a stable niche for extracting undeserved credit or targeting undeserved blame. If the patient recovers, it was due to my heroic efforts; if not, the underlying disease was too severe. If it weren't for my macroeconomic policy, the economy would be even worse. The abandonment of moral warfare and a wider appreciation of nexus causality and misattribution arbitrage would help us all shed at least some of the destructive delusions that cost humanity so much." [John Tooby]<sup>5)</sup>

Technologies have biases. "Soft technologies, from central currency to psychotherapy, are biased in their construction as much as their implementation. No matter how we spend U.S. dollars, we are nonetheless fortifying banking and the centralization of capital. Put a psychotherapist on his own couch and a patient in the chair and the therapist will begin to exhibit treatable pathologies. It's set up that way, just as Facebook is set up to make us think of ourselves in terms of our "likes".

[Douglas Rushkoff].<sup>6)</sup> "But without our biases to focus our attention, we would be lost in that endless and limitless expanse. W[...] Biases mediate between our intellect and emotions to help congeal perception into opinion, judgment, category, metaphor, analogy, theory, and ideology, which frame how we see the world. Bias is tentative. Bias adjusts as the facts change. Bias is a provisional Hypothesis. Bias is normal. [...] Truth need continually to be validated against all evidence that challenges it fairly and honestly. [...] Like the words in a multidimensional crossword puzzle, it has to fit together with all the other pieces already in place, The better and more elaborate the fit, the more certain the truth, Science permits no exceptions. It is inexorably revisionary, learning from its mistakes, erasing and rewriting even its most sacred texts, until the puzzle is complete." [Gerald Smallberg]<sup>7)</sup> The focusing illusion. "Income is an important determinant of people's satisfaction with their lives, but it is far less important than most people think. If everyone had the same income, the differences among people in life satisfaction would be reduced by less than 5 percent." "Paraplegics are often unhappy, but they are not unhappy all the time, because they spend most of the time experiencing and thinking about things other than their disability. When we think of what it is like to be a paraplegic, or blind, or a lottery winner, or a resident of California, we focus on the distinctive aspects of each of these conditions. The mismatch in the allocation of attention between thinking about a life condition and actually living it is the cause of focusing illusion." "People can be made to believe that school uniforms will significantly improve educational outcomes, or that health care reform will hugely change the quality of life in the United States - either for the better or for the worse." [Daniel Kahneman]<sup>8)</sup> "[...] When it comes to understanding

probability, people basically suck. [...] When a state government requires its citizens to buy car insurance, it does so because it figures, rightly, that people are underestimating the odds of an accident." [Seth Lloyd]9) Shifting Baseline Syndrome. "it forces you to continually ask what is normal. Is this? Was that? And, at least as important, it asks how we "know" that it's normal." [Paul Kedrosky]10) "[...] Not all explanations are created equal; some are objectively better than others. [...] It's inference to the best explanation that gives science the power to expand our ontology, giving us reasons to believe in things that we can't directly observe, from subatomic particles - or maybe strings - to the dark matter and dark energy of cosmology. It's inference to the best explanation that allows us to know something of what it's like to be other people on the basis of their behavior." [Rebecca Newberger Goldstein].11) "attention is highly selective." "Although there are billions of neurons in our brains firing all the time, we'd never be able to put one foot in front of the other if we were unable to ignore almost all of that hyperabundant parallel processing going on in the background. [...]" [Douglas T. Kenrick]12) "The small subset of the world that an animal is able to detect is its umwelt. The bigger reality, whatever that might mean, is called the umgebung. The interesting part is that each organism presumably assumes its umwelt to be the entire objective reality "out there". Why would any of us stop to think that there is more beyond what we can sense? [...] Truman show [...] A good illustration of our unawareness of the limits of our umwelt is that of color-blind people: Until they learn that others can see hues they cannot, the thought of extra colors do not hit their radar screen." [David Eagleman]13) "While most of us go through life feeling that we are the thinker of our thoughts and the experiencer of our experience, from the perspective of science we know that this is a distorted view. There is no discrete self or ego lurking like a Minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. There is no region of cortex or pathway of neural processing that occupies a privileged position with respect to our personhood. There is no unchanging "center of narrative gravity". In subjective terms, however, there SEEMS to be one - to most of us, most of the time." [Sam Harris]14) "Supervenience explains, for example, why physics is the most fundamental science and why the things that physicists study are the most fundamental things. To many people, this sounds like value judgement, but it's not, or need not be. Physics is fundamental because everything in the universe, from your pancreas to Ottawa, supervenes on physical stuff." [Joshua Greene]15) A cognitive toolkit full of garbage. "Is there a pragmatic way out, other than to radically get rid of mental garbage? Yes, perhaps: Simply not using the key shorthand abstractions explicitly in one's toolkit. Working on consciousness, don't use the SHA "consciousness." If you work on the "self", never refer explicitly to self. Going through one's own garbage, one discovers many misleading SHAs." [Ernst Poppel]

Outstanding capture of the thinking method(s) of a lot of very smart people. Why aren't THEY running the country...the world? There's something to learn from each of these professionals from all walks of life, and where else do we get a practically layman's discourse on HOW to think...think BETTER than we already do? Some of the concepts are common sense (not so common, is it?), others are minor eureka's, and some are counter-intuitive but valuable gems of research and discipline. I am so very grateful to John Brockman for putting together this volume of awesome--in the true sense of the word--essays. --An ordinary woman who thinks & a lifelong reader of science, philosophy, & good literature.

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