

Humankind's big questions

Literary agent and networker John Brockman on scientists as the intellectuals of the twenty-first century.

Humanities and sciences have traditionally been seen as “two cultures”, though as early as 1959, in his book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, physicist and novelist C.P. Snow was calling for them to close the communication gap to answer the big questions facing humankind. Some 30 years later, literary agent John Brockman coined the term “the third culture”. Over the past few years, his network of scientists and thinkers has been tackling questions that have traditionally been the preserve of religion and philosophy: the origins and meaning of life and what human nature – and human ethics – really are.

IT'S NOT EASY to find a single player who illustrates a phenomenon as complex as convergence, but if you try, the name that will rapidly come up is that of New York literary agent John Brockman. Brockman has his office in the heart of Manhattan, and the 69-year-old's desk is dominated by his computer, giving few clues to his work with manuscripts and papers. A vast photograph of a flower hangs on the wall, a scanner image created by his wife and business partner, Katinka Matson. And if you step out on to the balcony high above 59th Street, the view below is of Grand Army Plaza, embodying on three sides the cultural history of New York: to the right is the Plaza Hotel on Central Park, where Hollywood met politics in the twentieth century, while the CBS Tower dominates to the left. And in the middle sits the glass cube that is the Fifth Avenue Apple Store.

This thumbnail cultural history of New York City is also John Brockman's history. Originally an actor and artist, Brockman rose from the political sub-culture of the 1950s and 1960s to be a successful media professional and is now the most powerful literary agent of the digital age. It's important to note, though, that the term “most powerful” has nothing to do with Brockman's business success and everything to do with his place in contemporary intellectual history. It's true that as a literary agent, Brockman has singlehandedly secured advances for science writers of the kind normally reserved for authors of best-selling detective novels or fantasy. And, of course, his clients include all the key figures in new science writing – psychologist Steven Pinker, for example, anthropologist Jared Diamond, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and genetics researcher Craig Venter. But with his circle of several hundred of “the most interesting minds in the world”, Brockman has created not only a new genre of scientific literature but also a new form of intellectualism. He's even coined a term for it: “the third culture”.

“The third culture” is nothing other than a concrete expression of what philosophy understands by ‘convergence’: the areas where epistemology (the part of philosophy that deals with knowledge) and the natural sci-

“Third culture thinkers redefine who and what we are.”

ences overlap. Convergence is widely thought to be a standard notion in the history of ideas, yet Brockman was one of the first to recognize that the lack of it represented a major lacuna in the intellectual life of the West. He cites a 1959 lecture by British physicist and novelist C. P. Snow at the University of Cambridge as a “source of inspiration” for his own work: “C. P. Snow predicted a third culture in which literary people would learn science and communicate it,” he says, “but they didn’t, so the scientists started writing books themselves.”

Brockman published his “third culture manifesto” in the early 1990s, at the dawn of the digital age. He says on his website, “Traditional American intellectuals are, in a sense, increasingly reactionary and quite often proudly (and perversely) ignorant of the truly significant intellectual accomplishments of our time. Their culture, which dismisses science, is often non-empirical. The third culture, by contrast, consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectuals. They are communicating the deeper meaning of our lives, redefining who and what we are.”

Key debates play out in books

The third culture has little in common with popular science and much more with the notion of convergence. “Take Daniel Dennett,” says Brockman: “He’s one of America’s best philosophers. If he were an academic, he’d have to publish in philosophy journals, but their referees would reject his articles because he writes about psychology, artificial intelligence, computer science, neuroscience and psychiatry. Yet he wouldn’t be able to publish in any of the journals in those fields either, because he has no academic qualifications in them.” Dennett’s reply to Roger Penrose’s *The Emperor’s New Mind* (1989), in which Penrose makes the scientific case for an unbridgeable divide between consciousness and mathematics, proved a scientific milestone, though; his *Consciousness Explained* (1991) triggered a debate that would have far-reaching scientific impact. That was

over 20 years ago now. The whole debate would have been too complicated for the mass media, and the academic journals wouldn’t have taken it, so “it very quickly became clear that the debates about our future would be played out in books” says Brockman.

The power of interdisciplinary science

Brockman was also quick to realize that science writing could be effective in taking debates across traditional disciplinary boundaries. As a student at Columbia Business School, he spent his evenings in south Manhattan, where the sub-cultures and artists hung out. He recalls that “the artists were all reading science. Robert Rauschenberg turned me on to James Jeans’ *The Mysterious Universe*, and Claes Oldenburg was reading George Gamow’s *One, Two, Three... Infinity*.” But even more influential was a series of dinners organized by John Cage, at which the composer introduced his ideas to young artists: “Luckily, I was part of the group, and one evening – it must have been in 1965 – Cage said, ‘Here, this is for you’ and handed me a copy of *Cybernetics* by Norbert Wiener. Everything I’ve done since goes back to that moment.”

At the time, Brockman was managing the art house movie organization, the Filmmakers’ Cinémathèque, so shortly after this, he was invited by Wiener’s colleagues to bring avant-garde artists from New York to Cambridge, Mass., where they met with leading scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was on one of these trips that the young John Brockman saw for the first time one of the machines that fascinate him to this day. “They showed us one of the very first computers. There was a huge room behind glass, and inside were all these people with white coats and white gloves. It was cold, so they all had scarves on. I think I was 25, I had my nose pressed up against the glass, and I fell in love. Since then, everything I’ve done has been inspired by the notion of ‘computation’. And I’m not talking about computers; I’m talking about the cybernetic ideas that Wiener developed.”





RESUMÉ

John Brockman

John Brockman was born on February 16, 1941, the son of a wholesale florist in Boston, Massachusetts. While an MBA student at Columbia University, New York, in the early 1960s, Brockman joined the emerging cultural scene in downtown Manhattan. He was active as a multimedia artist and was part of the circle around the leading figure in the pop art movement, Andy Warhol. His friends also included composer John Cage. In 1973, he founded the literary agency Brockman, Inc., using it to transform science writing and taking complex issues into the best-seller lists. His clients include evolutionary biologist and combative atheist Richard Dawkins, psychologist Steven Pinker, anthropologist Jared Diamond, and geneticist Craig Venter. Brockman and his clients founded the Edge Foundation, Inc. in 1988; with its Internet forum and regular conferences, it spearheads a new intellectualism of empirical thinking.

Brockman is referring here to the idea of communication as a control mechanism for machinery, people, and systems. And these were the ideas that would lead to the computer rapidly evolving into more than just a number cruncher. “The work on the first computers was undoubtedly a prime example of the power of interdisciplinary research, because it brought computer scientists together with designers and sociologists. And now it’s informing the debate headed by Nicholas Carr and Clay Shirky, the two leading visionaries in the field of new media.”

It goes without saying that Internet analyst Carr and Shirky, a social and technology network researcher at New York University, are clients of Brockman’s agency, and that he has made their books best-sellers. But ivory towers tend not to produce much new thinking. Carr and Shirky aren’t just Brockman’s clients, they are also part of his global circle of scientists, thinkers and entrepreneurs, the people he calls the ‘digerati’ in a nod to the ‘literati’ of the twentieth century.

Intellectual sparring on the Internet

The Internet forum edge.org is where Brockman’s circle ‘meets’ and where experts trade ideas and opinions: critics of the Internet and Internet gurus, philosophers and biologists, psychologists and economists, astronomers and artists, radical thinkers and pioneers from a host of different areas of culture and science all find that they have more to say to each other here than they are able to get across through conventional publishing. John Brockman has 3,000 thinkers on his list, and it is to these people that he sends his ‘question of the year’ each December.

The questions are extremely short: “What now?”, “What do you believe is true, even though you cannot prove it?”, “What is your most dangerous idea?”, or “What will change everything?” But precisely because the questions are so short and focused, they provoke these radical thinkers into scintillating answers that often spawn independent research projects. For example, psychologist Steven Pinker’s answer to the 2006 question “What are you optimistic about?” – that we live in the least violent period in human history – provoked such an overwhelming response from other scientists that he devised a four-year research project out of it. The findings are due to be published in the fall of 2011.

The relevance of these issues has proven itself time and time again; just take the most recent question, “How is the Internet changing the way you think?” In the first week of January 2010, Brockman published 172 answers

on edge.org. The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins wrote about the intellectual “net gain” the Internet offers. Neurologist William Calvin talked about the Internet’s “enhancement of the thought process”. And anthropologist Scott Atran was positively enthusiastic about the “fourth phase of homo sapiens”. Others were more skeptical, though. Physicist Lisa Randall’s response was “The plural of anecdote is not data”. Paleontologist Scott Sampson mourned “the extinction of experience”. And software pioneer Kai Krause pronounced gloomily, “A million lemmings can be wrong.”

In Brockman’s network of converging ideas, edge.org also operates as a virtual nucleus. Brockman finds this way of linking people and ideas “more efficient”, though only as a starting point: “The Internet is not a replacement for people,” he says, “it just wouldn’t be fun.” This has led him to create a physical but global ‘salon’, regularly bringing together the elite of the digital and biotechnology age in New York, Boston, California or London or at Brockman’s summer retreat at Eastover Farm, Connecticut.

These are very exclusive gatherings. There’s the Billionaires’ Dinner held during the TED conference in Long Beach. There are other dinners and evening gatherings. And most importantly, there are Brockman’s Master Classes and conferences at Eastover Farm. A few years ago, for example, the leading thinkers in biotechnology met there one glorious summer weekend in a marquee erected on the lawn of the beautifully restored farmhouse. Among those present was Craig Venter from California, the man who sequenced the human genome, his colleague George Church, legendary science critic Freeman Dyson, and astronomer Dimitar Sasselov. They spent a day thinking about the origins of life and why we know so little about it. And in the course of their conversations, they talked about their work. That work was to make headlines in the scientific press over the next three years: Craig Venter created the first cell with an artificial genome, George Church launched the Personal Genome Project, Freeman Dyson challenged the use of climate change theory for ideological purposes, and Dimitar Sasselov discovered in our galaxy hundreds of thousands of planets similar to the Earth.

Brockman loves to recall such occasions, which sometimes make history. He calls to mind the weekend when he invited key players in behavioral science to Eastover; this young research discipline has revealed more about the financial crisis than conventional economics has been able to. Or there was his most recent



coup, in summer 2010. “I organize these meetings every year,” he says, “but this year, I was scratching my head, I couldn’t come up with anything. Then I realized that seven new books on moral psychology had just been published. Seven! And I am working with all seven authors. So suddenly, the question emerged: what is moral psychology as opposed to psychology and morals?”

The top thinkers spent two days thrashing out the issues. And once again, Brockman was breaking new ground in encouraging the debate. Admittedly, it didn’t take much effort. He got on the phone and invited friends and clients and afterwards, from his desk high above 59th Street, he uploaded the transcripts and videos from the weekend onto his website. By hand. “Of course by hand” he says, “It’s all pretty automatic now. I upload a text file to the computer, and because I code it myself, I am really reading it and really thinking about these things. I’m learning.” Then he sends the new ideas off to the network that feeds them into debates, media discourse and scientific narrative. He’d love this to produce yet more books, but Brockman is even more interested in bringing ideas together. “My work with Edge reminds me of being at graduate school. I’m learning. Except that now, I’m the only student. And that’s a huge pleasure”.