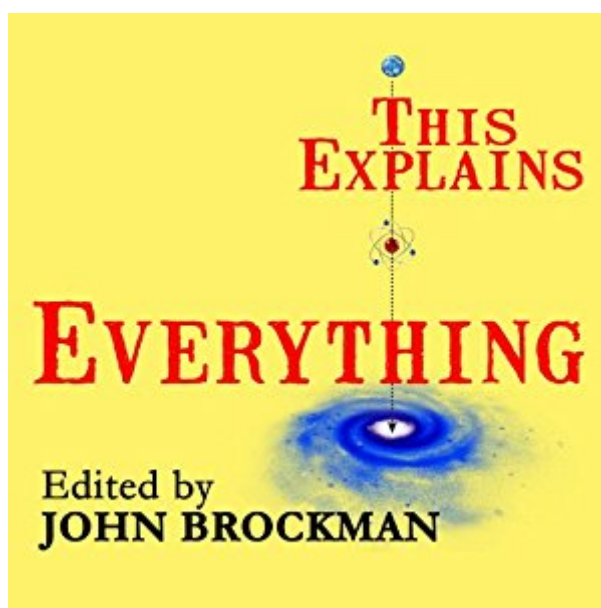


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# This Explains Everything: Deep, Beautiful, And Elegant Theories Of How The World Works



## Synopsis

In *This Explains Everything*, John Brockman, founder and publisher of Edge.org, asked experts in numerous fields and disciplines to come up with their favorite explanations for everyday occurrences. Why do we recognize patterns? Is there such a thing as positive stress? Are we genetically programmed to be in conflict with each other? Those are just some of the 150 questions that the world's best scientific minds answer with elegant simplicity. With contributions from Jared Diamond, Richard Dawkins, Nassim Taleb, Brian Eno, Steven Pinker, and more, everything is explained in fun, uncomplicated terms that make the most complex concepts easy to comprehend.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*This Explains Everything: Deep, Beautiful, and Elegant Theories of How the World Works* Edited by John Brockman "This Explains Everything" is a wonderful book of essays from the Edge that addresses a question that inspires unpredictable answers. The Edge is an organization that presents original ideas by today's leading thinkers from a wide spectrum of scientific fields. The 2012 Edge question is, "What is your favorite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation?" This interesting 432-page book contains 148 short essays that addresses the question. The quality of the essays range from the 3-word absurdity of "Keep It Simple" to the elegant and profound essay that addresses why the sky is blue through a brief history of converging sciences. For my sake, I created a spreadsheet of all the essays and graded them from zero to five stars based on quality. Five star essays are those that provide a great description of the author's favorite explanation. On the other

hand, those receiving a one or even a zero represent essays that were not worthy of this book. Of course, this is just one reviewer's personal opinion.

**Positives:**

1. The book starts with a great premise, "What is your favorite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation?"
2. A great range of scientific topics. Thought-provoking ideas.
3. Generally well written, well organized essays. High quality value.
4. You don't have to read the essays in order, you can just jump to your favorite authors or topics.
5. The theory of evolution shines brightest amongst the stars; regardless of the field of expertise these authors have a great admiration for indeed one of the most beautiful, elegant explanations in all of science.
6. There were eleven outstanding essays deserving of five stars for me. In order of essay, the first by Gerd Gigerenzer, "Unconscious Inferences". It discusses the nature of perception. Excellent illustration to bring it all together.
7. V.S. Ramachandran's "Genes, Claustrum, and Consciousness". He argues that the same strategy used to crack the genetic code might prove successful in cracking the "neural" code. And that's why I read books of this ilk...
8. David M. Eagleman's "Overlapping Solutions" explains beautifully the overlapping ways the brain deals with the world.
9. Andrew Lih's "Information is the Resolution of Uncertainty" introduces us to Claude Shannon the man behind the elegant theory of information.
10. Helen Fisher's "Epigenetics-The Missing Link" provides the reader with the dare I say it emerging field of epigenetics in which the environmental forces can affect gene behavior.
11. John Tooby's "Falling into Place: Entropy and the Desperate Ingenuity of Life" provides a trio of elegant scientific ideas: entropy, natural selection, and frames of reference.
12. Eric R. Kandel's "Placing Psychotherapy on a Scientific Basis: Five Easy Lessons" discusses the very topical need of treating mental illnesses. Great essay!
13. Randolph Nesse's excellent "Natural Selection is Simple but the Systems it shapes are Unimaginably Complex" makes it very clear that there is a distinction between machines and organisms.
14. My favorite essay belongs to Nicholas A. Christakis, "Out of the Mouth of Babes". It starts with a very simple question from childhood. Why is the sky blue? A question so simple a child can ask but takes many of the greatest minds over time to converge to a satisfactory answer. Philosophy and science as one, now that's beautiful!
15. Alison Gopnik's timely and fascinating "Developmental Timing Explains the Woes of Adolescence."
16. The great Jared Diamond completes the great eleven with the "Origins of Biological Electricity". Interesting, quirky interspersed with some great tidbits.
17. Great authors consistently provide great essays, you can always count on: Dawkins, Pinker, Steinhardt, Carroll, Zimmer, PZ Myers, Atkins, Krauss, and Shermer. They all provided excellent essays.
18. Alan Turing, Galileo, and of course Einstein deserve a special mention. Turing's life is fascinating and I highly recommend reading his biography. The great Darwin goes without saying.
19. Excellent editing.

**Negatives:**

1. Some essays were not worthy of this book. It's not my

intent to denigrate any of these great minds so I'm not going to mention them by name. Thankfully just a few received zero stars.<sup>2</sup> I'm disappointed that no one mentioned Henrietta Swan Leavitt the astronomer who discovered how to calculate the distance from the stars. Or Barbara McClintock's genetic transposition. And of course one can never go wrong with Marie Curie. You know where I'm going with this...just an observation. In summary, this is an interesting and fun book of essays for inquisitive minds. Philosophy is about asking the right questions and good science is about answering them. A perfect balance of elegance is attained when the right question is responded in turn with a sound, succinct scientific response. This book contains a wide range of responses from my favorite eleven to some not worthy of the book, but overall a fun and enjoyable read. I recommend it! Further suggestions: "A Universe From Nothing" by Lawrence Krauss, "The Greatest Show on Earth" by Richard Dawkins, "The Disappearing Spoon And Other True Tales of Madness BY Kean" by Sam Kean, "The Tell-Tale Brain" by V.S. Ramachandran, "The Believing Brain" by Michael Shermer, "How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed" by Ray Kurzweil, "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature" by Steven Pinker, "Guns, Germs and Steel" by Jared Diamond, "Why Evolution Is True" by Jerry A. Coyne, and "Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior" by Leonard Mlodinow.

A theory that explains a lot with a clear and simple set of ideas is much beloved by scientists and social scientists alike. In this book, about 150 renowned thinkers were asked what theory they thought explained the most with the least. Every year, Edge.org (the online face of an Algonquin Round Table-like group called "The Reality Club") produces a question to direct toward members, and this book resulted from the 2012 question. The editor, John Brockman, had his work cut out for him given limited space and the fact that a few theories (e.g. Darwinian Evolution) would be rehashed ad nauseam without coordination. (Many authors cited Darwin, even if they weren't discussing evolution because they knew it already had been addressed from many angles.) The contributors are a veritable who's who of science, and include: Matt Ridley, Richard Dawkins, Leonard Susskind, Frank Wilczek, Steven Pinker, Martin J. Rees, Max Tegmark, Freeman Dyson, V.S. Ramachandran, David Eagleman, Robert Sapolsky, Richard Thaler, Daniel Dennett, Howard Gardner, Lisa Randall, Eric R. Kandel, Alison Gopnik, Lee Smolin, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Jared Diamond, and Michael Shermer. One may note that not all of the authors are, strictly-speaking, scientists. The book even ventures into the arts and humanities, including contributors such as Alan Alda and Brian Eno. Of course, this means that the book sometimes veers away from theories that have explanatory power on the scale of natural

selection or the neat offerings of physics and chemistry, but these entries often provide some intriguing food-for-thought. All of the entries are short; some are less than a page and most are less than three. Given the range of authors, the approaches and the degree of colorfulness employed in entries varies greatly. There are few graphics and no ancillary matter (notations or bibliography) except for an editor's introduction. It's good bathroom reading, or for any other time when one has a couple free minutes to take in an idea. I enjoyed this book, and found it thought-provoking. Often it wasn't the expected theories (i.e. the most parsimonious) that provided the greatest revelatory insights. There were even responses that challenged the nature of the question. One won't necessarily find all the responses present elegant theories, or that all of them even are theories, but that's not the point. They are all ideas that have merit in some regard. One will see old standards (e.g. the 2nd law of thermodynamics) from new angles and will be exposed to ideas that might be entirely new (e.g. the Faurie-Raymond hypothesis that suggests the advantage of lefties in fighting.) I found essays on swarm intelligence and frames of reference taking my thinking in new directions. I'd recommend this book for those looking for some interesting thinking on elegant ideas.

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