



January 25, 2008 6:40 p.m. EST

BOOK EXCERPT

'What Are You Optimistic About?'

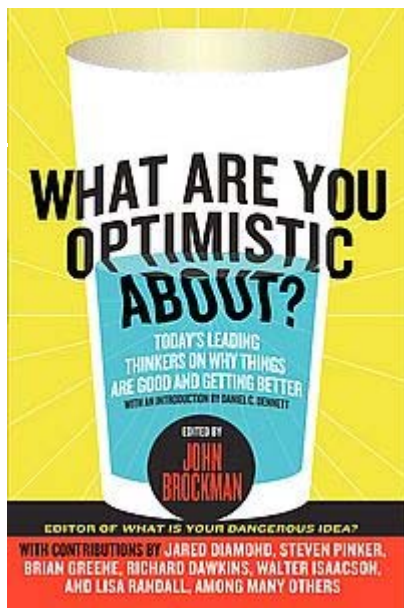
Edited by John Brockman

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Introduction: By Daniel C. Dennett

*I hear the human race
 Is fallin' on its face,
 And hasn't very far to go.*

So sings naïve Nellie Forbush in South Pacific. This self-styled "cock-eyed optimist" is quite aware that she's bucking the fashion, the centuries-long tradition of disdain for those whose outlook is too rosy. Along with Pollyanna and Dr. Pangloss, she symbolizes the top-down, fact-free ideology of progress: Things will get better; we can do it! We're living in the best of all possible worlds! Nellie knows that the word on the street is that this is folly, but she's "stuck like a dope with a thing called hope."



Courtesy HarperCollins


The contributors to this very cheering anthology are also full of hope, but theirs is a different brand of optimism, born of expertise and hard, imaginative thinking. And one of the most optimistic things about the collection is the breadth and variety of things the contributors are optimistic about. So many different ways we can make the world better! So many lights at the end of so many tunnels! Here we find schemes for cooling the Arctic ice cap, solving our energy problems, democratizing the global economy, improving transparency in government, muffling or dissolving religious discord, and even enlarging our personal intelligence and improving the phenomenon of friendship. We can come to understand ourselves and each other better, finally master math, and share our good fortune with larger segments of the world's population (which will soon stabilize).

It's all too good to be true, of course. That is, it can't all be sound prognostication. Some of the schemes will eventually prove to be cock-eyed, but we can't tell which ones until we try them and test them.

This is part of the strength of the phenomenon: We have an open forum of candidates that can compete for credibility and feasibility, and the competition—if we manage it right—will be judged on excellence, not political support or authoritarian fiat. It's not who you know; it's what you know.

Knowledge is the thread that runs through all the entries. Not Knowledge of the (Divine, Mysterious) Truth, but good old knowledge of facts, (lower-case) truths dug up and confirmed by careful testing—the kind of knowledge that has been steadily accumulating in the human race for thousands of years and is now expanding explosively on almost all topics. With some few remarkable—and much

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analyzed—exceptions, once we human beings figure something out, it stays figured out. We can add it to our capacious treasurehouse of facts and put it to a hundred different uses, as opportunities arise. This store of shared and transmitted knowledge is surely what explains the enormous change that the human race has brought about on our planet in recent times. Ten thousand years ago, long after the taming of fire but not so long after the dawn of agriculture, our ancestors, together with all their livestock and pets, didn't make much of a dent—approximately 0.1 of 1 percent of the terrestrial biomass, according to calculations made by Paul MacCready, the green-minded chairman of Aerovironment, Inc. We were just another primate with some unique habits. Today, we and our domesticated animals make up about 98 percent of the terrestrial biomass, and what little wildlife remains is heavily dependent on us for its survival. As MacCready put it in a recent Web essay ("An Ambivalent Luddite at a Technological Feast"):

Over billions of years, on a unique sphere, chance has painted a thin covering of life—complex, improbable, wonderful, and fragile. Suddenly we humans (a recently arrived species no longer subject to the checks and balances inherent in nature), have grown in population, technology, and intelligence to a position of terrible power: we now wield the paintbrush.

The explosive growth of power—of sheer can do—enjoyed by our human species means that many things are possible now that were never before possible, for good and for ill. Is there any reason to suppose that we will use this power mainly for good? In fact, there is—even in the face of all the "man-made" calamities this power has enabled. This comes out vividly in many of the contributions. First, however myopic our initial forays into a project or campaign may be, there is a built-in tradition—across the spectrum of human activity—of reflection and criticism, a habit of reevaluation that is designed to look for flaws and problems, opportunities to improve, signs that a midcourse correction is called for. Science sets the gold standard for this, with its layers and layers of review, evaluation, testing, and policing. It is no coincidence that when sciencephobes want to brandish examples of scientific folly, prejudice, misrepresentation, and sheer dishonesty, they invariably help themselves to the results of investigations conducted by the sciences themselves. Why? Because no other institution is better equipped for such intense self-policing, such relentless self-exposure. Indeed, when other institutions clean house—when the media sets out to investigate their own biases and shortcomings, or when businesses or churches or government institutions engage in self-evaluation—they use techniques of unbiased data-gathering, statistics, experimentation, and argumentation that have been honed by the sciences over the centuries. And everywhere you look, you find people "going meta-," adding a recursive loop of inquiry on top of the inquiries they have made so far. For every analysis, there is meta-analysis. There are not just composers and musicians, there are music critics and prize committees—and pundits ready to issue judgments about the quality of the work of those critics and committees. There are people who earn a good living selling information about whom to ask about whom to ask about which stocks to purchase. Need to hire a new consultant for some task? You can find people to advise you on which headhunters are best at finding the right consultants for your circumstances.

In this ever-deepening tier of recursive explorations, there are also sidelong inquiries about the point of it all and about the chance that structural biases are built into our pyramid of knowledge. Several contributors write about the importance—and risks—of the democratization of knowledge being accomplished by the Internet. The movement to create Open Access to academic journals, for instance, promises to collapse the barriers of time, expense, and opportunity that have kept all but the elite few from acquaintance with the frontier in any field. But will the increasing transparency enabled—and demanded—by information technologies across all human endeavor be exploitable by parasites, like spam, music piracy, and their unnamed cousins waiting in the wings? Will our descendants learn how to be relatively immune to hype, as one contributor proposes, or will the spin doctors always stay a step or two ahead?

Cyberspace is still a largely anarchic territory, expanding faster than we can devise rules and principles to

protect what needs protection. Will the arms race of yet further expansions of knowhow be at least a standoff, keeping society abreast of the problems? Will particular institutions prove especially vulnerable? Religions, for instance, have thrived for millennia in societies where knowledge could be severely restricted and are now discovering that they cannot erect a barrier able to hold back the flood of information, so they are searching for ways to preserve the allegiance of their members, by applying the resources of science and technology—surveys, focus groups, consultants, and every new media wrinkle. In the process, they are evolving faster than religions have ever evolved before. They are not alone in regretting the hyperavailability of information. What secret facts do you have a right not to know? Your IQ? Your chances of succumbing to Huntington's chorea or some other disease? Your popularity among your co-workers? On these and many other vexing questions we will need all the expert help we can get from those who think, for good reason, that they can see at least a little bit farther into the future than the rest of us. The seers assembled here are reassuringly hopeful.

But consider who they are, says the skeptic. They are all endowed with more than their fair share of position, security, and prestige. Not a one of them is poor, and a few are billionaires. No wonder they exude confidence and optimism! But even more important, I think, than security and prestige (and money), they are alike in being fortunate enough to be engaged on the cutting edge of whatever it is that matters the most to them. How many people in the world get to devote so much of their time and energy to such gratifying projects? Not enough—but, once again, knowledge is probably the key, and as we democratize access to it, more and more people will find the ways, and the time and energy, to construct meaningful lives, responsive to their own well-informed values. That will be a tumultuous world, but a better one.

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