

The Galileo effect: dangerous ideas waiting to happen

A group of scientists has been given freedom to express heretical theories. Steve Farrar reports

Here's an idea. The way you raise your children has no influence on their personalities, their intelligence or the way they behave when they leave the family home. Sound ridiculous, offensive, dangerous even? But Judith Rich Harris, author of *The Nurture Assumption*, insists that aside from cases of abuse and neglect there is no robust scientific evidence to justify society's overwhelming faith in the power of mums and dads to mould their children's psyches.

Despite the unending effort to meet your offspring's every demand, are they any more happy, self-confident, mentally healthy or less aggressive today than 60 years ago, when adults, not children, were masters of the home?

Unsurprisingly, Harris's idea sparked outrage when she first suggested it. Top psychologists speculated as to whether it constituted a licence for parental neglect. Harris had expected trouble but despite the fury the hard evidence necessary to debunk her idea has yet to be produced. "The Establishment's failure to shoot me down has been nothing short of astonishing," she says.

By definition, dangerous ideas like Harris's always provoke a reaction. They challenge the assumptions of the day. The more profound threaten our understanding of the universe, our place within it and the ways in which we live our lives, and are often dismissed without serious consideration of the facts. That is not to say that all will ultimately be proved correct or useful — on the contrary, most are rightly discarded by history. But some can eventually have an enormous influence on the way we think.

Harris's proposal is just one of a collection of 108 similarly challenging notions put forward by some of the world's sharpest minds when asked: "What is your dangerous idea?" Among those taking part in this provocative project were Lord Rees, president of the Royal Society, Richard Dawkins, the Oxford evolutionist, Craig Venter, the human genome pioneer, and Freeman Dyson, the physicist.

They have produced speculative statements of fact or policy backed up by evidence and argument. And it is this disturbing quality of possibility that makes them dangerous, argues John Brockman, the celebrated New York literary agent who is behind the whole initiative. "They deal with taboo subjects that people don't want to think about," he says. "And they are dangerous not because they are false but because they could be true."

How about the notion that our planet is not in peril — even if humankind faces a bleak future, the Earth and life will get on just fine without us. Or that the mental capacity to commit despicable atrocities against our fellow humans has evolved to be innate within every one of us. What about the suggestion that democracy is doomed as the proportion of well educated people in an increasingly globalised world inexorably shrinks. Could we be virtual

simulations, are we mere puppets of our genes — do we really possess conscious free will?

Scientists and empirical thinkers have always generated dangerous ideas as they wrestle with evidence and theories that appear to contradict conventional wisdom and widely accepted social mores. Dawkins sees this as healthy for society. “Dangerous ideas are what has driven humanity onward, usually to the consternation of the majority in any particular age who thrive on familiarity and fear change,” he says. “Yesterday’s dangerous idea is today’s orthodoxy and tomorrow’s cliché.” He adds, however, that it is patently not enough for an idea just to be dangerous. It must also be good.

It was, of course, a particularly good idea to bring this remarkable group of scientists and thinkers together. Few would have been capable of doing so. But not for nothing has Brockman been described by Dawkins as having “the most enviable address book in the English-speaking world”. More than that, though, he has an insatiable hunger for ideas and intellectual debate. Back in the 1960s, when Brockman was working alongside the likes of Bob Dylan, Andy Warhol and Hunter S Thompson as an avant-garde arts promoter, he was invited regularly to dine and debate with John Cage, the composer and philosopher, and a small group of fiercely bright young artists and scientists. The experience had a profound impact on him. “Out of that I got an appreciation for almost the purity of ideas and the excitement of rubbing shoulders with people that could challenge you,” he says.

When his friend, the late conceptual artist James Lee Byars, proposed getting together 100 of the world’s greatest thinkers to debate with one another in a single room, Brockman shared his excitement at the prospect of an explosion of ideas. And although the project — the World Question Centre — never got off the ground, the concept lived on. Working with Heinz Pagels, the physicist, Brockman later founded the Reality Club so that top thinkers could spar with and inspire one another over dinner. In 1997 he took this informal conversation into cyberspace with the online magazine Edge. It is here that the intellectual elite that he has gathered now thrash out their often contrary views. And it is here that each year on January 1, Brockman posts the group’s answers to a different, deceptively simple question. In 2005 it was: “What do you believe to be true, but cannot prove?” Last year it was: “What is your dangerous idea?”

The question was proposed by the psychologist Steven Pinker, a prominent member of the group. “I suggested to John Brockman that he devote his annual Edge question to dangerous ideas because I believe that they are likely to confront us at an increasing rate and that we are ill-equipped to deal with them,” Pinker says. He notes that such ideas get loaded with ethical implications that in retrospect often seem ludicrous. The urge to suppress heretical views is, Pinker declares, a recurring human weakness.

Brockman remarks: “Try holding up a glass of wine in a church and asking is this the blood of Christ or does it represent the blood of Christ. That’s an idea that hundreds of thousands of people have died for over the centuries.”

Nicolaus Copernicus, the 16th-century Polish astronomer, was aware that his suggestion that the Earth was not at the centre of the universe but instead went around the sun was dangerously controversial because it removed humankind from the heart of creation. Mindful of potential repercussions, he delayed publication until he was on his deathbed. Galileo would ultimately be tried for heresy for daring to support Copernicus’s theory.

The controversy surrounding Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection and its implications for the origins of mankind rumbles on,

124 years after his death. Today in the West free thinkers still risk being ostracised for their views.

On the Edge website dangerous ideas are celebrated, although individually they get subjected to ruthless scrutiny. Visitors — there have been almost 5m this year — get to eavesdrop the whole conversation, although participation is by invitation only. Brockman has high hopes for the group. He refers to them as members of the “third culture” who are taking over from the traditional literary intellectuals.

Furthermore, since his days debating with Cage, he has believed that the ideas of such leading thinkers are not mere academic exercises — they will shape history and ultimately touch the lives of everyone on the planet.

Of course, among the 108 thinkers was a dissenter. Daniel Hillis, the computer scientist, suggested that the idea that we should all share our most dangerous ideas was a dangerous idea. What about those notions about causing terror, pain and chaos, or those that seek to convince people of things that are not true?

“Ideas are the most powerful forces we can unleash on the world and they should not be let loose without careful consideration of their consequences,” he notes. And so, with the one obvious exception, Hillis rejects the idea that he should share his dangerous ideas: “I hope it never catches on.”

Now for the other scientists and thinkers of Brockman’s third culture, that surely is the most dangerous idea of all.

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