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What's Next? Dispatches on the Future of Science. Max Brockman (ed.). Vintage Books, New York. 2009. xv + 237 pp. Price: US$ 15.

What's Next? is a collection of essays edited by Max Brockman, a literary agent. An interesting aspect of the book is the brief description of each author preceding their respective essays. The 18 essays are drawn from various fields such as physics, neuroscience and evolutionary biology, composed by a genre of researchers who have not previously written for non-academic readers, as mentioned in the preface. Although most of the essays revolve around neuroscience, I believe these would be equally interesting for readers from a varied background. However, the two essays on cosmology – 'Our Place in an Unnatural Universe' by Sean Carroll and 'Just What is Dark Energy?' by Stephon H. S. Alexander – demand a basic understanding of concepts in physics.

The essays also provide a set of analogies keeping the interest of readers from waning. All the essays are worthwhile and the one on climate change by Laurence C. Smith explores the possibility of population redistribution pattern with reference to the Northern Rim (comprising North America, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia) due to effects of climate change and availability of economic opportunities. He also highlights the effects of climate change and gives the picture of how 'climate change' phenomenon has been accepted as a reality by people at large. The essays pertaining to neurosciences discuss how the brain ascribes humans an advantage over other species; 'synaptic pruning' (elimination of connections in the brain) during development; 'mirror neurons' that respond when we watch someone's actions and yet do not make us imitate them, enabling exchange of experiences with the people around, and so on. In 'How Does Our Language Shape the Way We Think?', Lera Boroditsky eloquently describes the effect of one's language on behaviour, by providing examples from English speaking, German speaking and Russian speaking groups given the same set of experiments to perform. Vanessa Woods (an award-winning journalist) and Brian Hare (an anthropologist) suggest a 'theory of mind' that makes humans distinct from chimpanzees and allows for social behaviours such as human curiosity about what others are thinking.

Nathan Wolfe in 'The Aliens Among Us' questions whether a virus is a friend or foe of mankind. He brings to light the ecological significance of viruses. For instance, he mentions that '20–40% of bacteria in marine systems are killed by viruses each day' returning organic matter for recycling, thus sustaining the nutrient cycle. They also generate genetic variation. The last essay, 'Why Hasn't Specialization Led to the Balkanization of Science?' by Gavin Schmidt is a treat as it underlines how fragmentation into sub-fields hampers communication of important research findings. Not only this, it also draws attention to the kinds of papers that get noticed and to accessibility of data.

The book is a pleasure to peruse and I would recommend it not only to early researchers, but also to undergraduates and laymen who must be made aware of the new areas of research in natural and social sciences.

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