

“The Third Culture” , by John Brockman, Simon & Schuster, distributed in India by IBD, Rs. 695/, (1995).

If there is one striking feature of the intellectual landscape today, it is the increasing importance of science as opposed to literature or philosophy. Science and scientists are at the centre stage of intellectual debates on wide ranging topics from the nature of the mind to that of the universe. This is in sharp contrast to earlier periods in history where the classics and humanities formed the core of what was expected to be known by an intellectual.

It was in 1963 that C.P. Snow introduced the term “third culture “as a bridge between the literary intellectuals and the scientists. In recent years, one has seen scientists writing books about their works which have become instant best-sellers. Starting with S. Weinberg’s “The First Three Minutes” , we have had Hawking’s “A Brief History of Time” and more recently Penrose’s “ The Emperor’s New Mind” to name a few. These books have contributed to a better public understanding of the work done by scientists in as diverse fields as cognitive sciences or cosmology.

Now John Brockman has brought together a galaxy of star scientists to talk about what they feel are important ideas in their fields. The book is divided into five sections with a small introduction. Some of the fundamental questions posed are: Where did the universe come from? Where did life come from? What is the future of artificial intelligence? What is the relationship between cognition, the mind and self-realization?

These are obviously **the** questions that need to be answered by civilization today. The fields covered include evolution, cosmology, cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence and complexity theory. Surprisingly, particle physics is excluded from discussion. Brockman has collected the very best workers in the field to talk about their work, their views on the status of their respective fields and more interestingly speculate on the future. Here we have evolutionary biologists like Stephen Jay Gould talking about “The Pattern of Life’s History”, Lynn Margulis (the co-founder of the Gaia hypothesis) writing about “Gaia is a tough bitch”, the AI guru Marvin Minsky on “ Smart Machines”, the philosopher of the mind Daniel Dennett on “Intuition Pumps” and many others.

The writings of each of the contributors is very clear and accessible to the non-expert. The interesting thing about the contributions is that the open questions in the field are discussed at some length. At the end of each piece is a discussion of sorts by other contributors in the field which is very illuminating. The discussion not only brings out the assortment of ideas about the subject but also lets us have a peek into the personalities themselves. For instance, the psychologist Francisco Varela calling Marvin Minsky an “arrogant son of a bitch”!

John Brockman is a remarkable person. A literary agent by profession, he is one of the founders of The Reality Club, a collection of best-selling authors, scientists and other intellectuals. In 1988, he edited an extremely interesting volume of the presentations made by various scientists to the Reality Club under the title “Speculations”. Now with “The Third Culture” he has again come out with an important book which will go a long way in bridging the gap between the two cultures of the literary intellectuals (or even the lay persons) and the scientists.