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The 150 Things the World's Smartest People Are Afraid Of

By [Brian Merchant \(/author/BrianMerchant\)](#)

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Every year, the online magazine *Edge*--the so-called [smartest website in the world](#) ([http://edge.org/conversation/-quotthe-man-who-runs-the-world-39s-smartest-website-quot-in-the-observer](#)), helmed by science impresario John Brockman--asks top scientists, technologists, writers, and academics to weigh in on a single question. This year, that query was "What Should We Be Worried About?" ([http://edge.org/annual-question/q2013](#)), and the idea was to identify new problems arising in science, tech, and culture that haven't yet been widely recognized.

This year's respondents include former presidents of the Royal Society, Nobel prize-winners, famous sci-fi authors, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Brian Eno, and a bunch of top theoretical physicists, psychologists, and biologists. And the list is long. Like, book-length long. There are some 150 different things that worry 151 of the planet's biggest brains. And I read about them all, so you don't have to: here's the Buzzfeedized version, with the money quote, title, or summary of the fear pulled out of each essay. Obviously, [go read the rest](#) ([http://edge.org/annual-question/q2013](#)) if any of the below get you fretting too.

What keeps the smartest folks in the world awake at night? Here goes:

1. The proliferation of Chinese eugenics. – Geoffrey Miller, evolutionary psychologist.

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ABOUT BRIAN MERCHANT



Warm-blooded utopianist. I'm also on [Google Plus](#)

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2. Black swan events, and the fact that we continue to rely on models that have been proven fraudulent. – Nassim Nicholas Taleb
3. That we will be unable to defeat viruses by learning to push them beyond the error catastrophe threshold. – William McEwan, molecular biology researcher
4. That pseudoscience will gain ground. – Helena Cronin, author, philosopher
5. That the age of accelerating technology will overwhelm us with opportunities to be worried. – Dan Sperber, social and cognitive scientist
6. Genuine apocalyptic events. The growing number of low-probability events that could lead to the total devastation of human society. – Martin Rees, former president of the Royal Society
7. The decline in science coverage in newspapers. – Barbara Strauch, New York Times science editor



(/blog/lost-in-the-bradley-

mannino-narrative-what-he-actually-leaked)



image (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-10867687>)

8. Exploding stars, the eventual collapse of the Sun, and the problems with the human id that prevent us from dealing with them. -- John Tooby, founder of the field of evolutionary psychology
9. That the internet is ruining writing. – David Gelernter, Yale computer scientist
10. That smart people--like those who contribute to Edge--won't do politics. –Brian Eno, musician
11. That there will be another supernova-like financial disaster. –Seth Lloyd, professor of Quantum Mechanical Engineering at MIT
12. That search engines will become arbiters of truth. --W. Daniel Hillis, physicist
13. The dearth of desirable mates is something we should worry about, for "it lies behind much human treachery and brutality." –David M. Buss, professor of psychology at U of T
14. "I'm worried that our technology is helping to bring the long, postwar consensus against fascism to an end." –David Bodanis, writer, futurist
15. That we will continue to uphold taboos on bad words. –Benjamin Bergen, Associate Professor of Cognitive Science, UCS
16. Data disenfranchisement. –David Rowan, editor, *Wired UK*

17. That digital technologies are sapping our patience and changing our perception of time. — Nicholas G. Carr, author
18. An “underpopulation bomb.” —Kevin Kelly, editor-at-large, *Wired*.
19. That funding for big experiments will dry up, and they won't happen. —Lisa Randall, Harvard physicist
20. “I worry that as the problem-solving power of our technologies increases, our ability to distinguish between important and trivial or even non-existent problems diminishes.” —Evgeny Morozov, contributing editor, *Foreign Policy*
21. Not much. I ride motorcycles without a helmet. —J. Craig Venter, genomic scientist
22. Catharsis is a transcendent joy that—can you repeat question? —Andrian Kreye, editor, *German Daily Newspaper*
23. “I've given up asking questions. I merely float on a tsunami of acceptance of anything life throws at me... and marvel stupidly.” (complete answer)--Terry Gilliam
24. “We should be worried about the new era of Anthropocene—not only as a geological phenomenon, but also as a cultural frame.” —Jennifer Jacquet, clinical assistant professor of environmental studies, NYU
25. Cultural extinction, and the fact that the works of an obscure writer from the Caribbean may not get enough attention. —Hans Ulrich Obrist. curator, Serptine Gallery
26. The Danger Of Inadvertently Praising Zygomatic Arches. --Robert Sopolsky, neuroscientist



image (<http://archive.foolz.us/sp/thread/22736511/>)

27. That we will stop dying. —Kate Jeffery, professor of behavioural neuroscience
28. That there are an infinity of universes out there, but that we are only able to study the one we live in. —Lawrence M. Krauss, physicist/cosmologist
29. The rise of anti-intellectualism and the end of progress. “We’ve now, for the first time, got a

single global civilization. If it fails, we all fail together.” –Tim O’Reilly, CEO and founder of O’Reilly Media

30. We should worry about several "modern" States that, in practical terms, are shaped by crime; States in which bills and laws are promulgated by criminals and, even worse, legitimized through formal and "legal" democracy. – Eduardo Salcedo-albaran, Colombian philosopher

31. “We should worry that so much of our science and technology still uses just five main models of probability—even though there are more probability models than there are real numbers.” –Bart Kosko, information scientist

32. “It is possible that we are rare, fleeting specks of awareness in an unfeeling cosmic desert, the only witnesses to its wonder. It is also possible that we are living in a universal sea of sentience, surrounded by ecstasy and strife that is open to our influence. Sensible beings that we are, both possibilities should worry us.” Timo Hannay, publisher

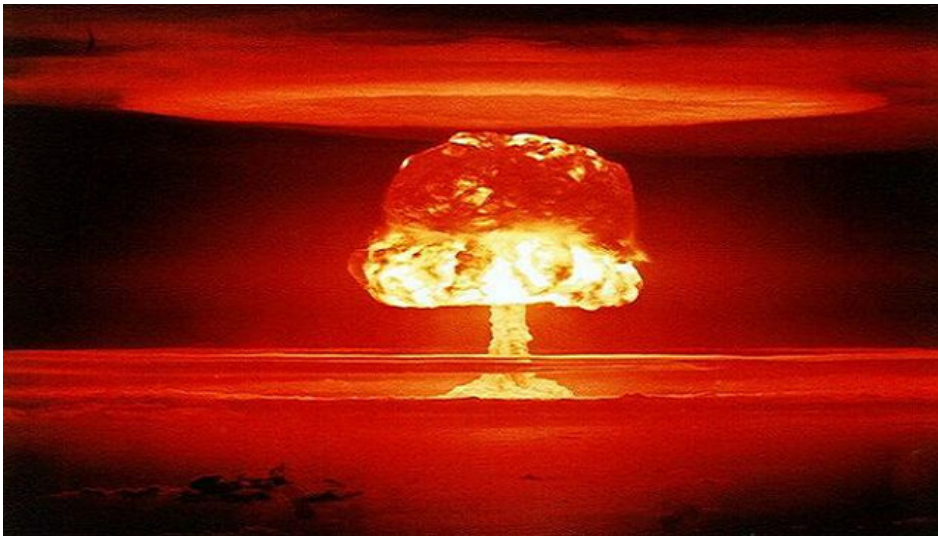
33. Men. –Helen Fisher, biological anthropologist

34. The social media-fication of science writing. –Michael I. Norton, Harvard Business School prof

35. Humanity’s unmitigated arrogance. –Jessica L. Tracy, professor of psychology

36. That technology may endanger democracy. –Haim Harari, physicist

37. Don’t worry—there won’t be a singularity. –Bruce Sterling, sci-fi author



38. Mutually-assured destruction. –Vernor Vinge, mathematician, computer scientist, author

39. “The diversion of intellectual effort from innovation to exploitation, the distraction of incessant warfare, rising fundamentalism” may trigger a Dark Age. –Frank Wilczek, MIT physicist

40. We need institutions and cultural norms that make us better than we tend to be. It seems to me that the greatest challenge we now face is to build them. –Sam Harris, neuroscientist

41. “I worry that we don’t really understand quantum phenomena” –Lee Smolin, physicist

42. That Americans are homogenizing and exporting their view of a normal mind around the world. –P. Murali Doraiswamy, professor of psychiatry

43. The future of science publishing. --Marco Iacoboni, neuroscientist

44. That the new digital public sphere isn't really so public. —Andrew Lih, journalism professor
45. "I further postulate we should in fact be "Worried" not just about a single selected problem, but about *all possible* problems." —Richard Foreman, playwright and director
46. Stress. —Arianna Huffington, aggregationist extraordinaire
47. "We should be worried that science has not yet brought us closer to understanding cancer." Xeni Jardin, Boing Boing
48. That we will literally lose touch with the physical world. —Christine Finn, archaeologist.



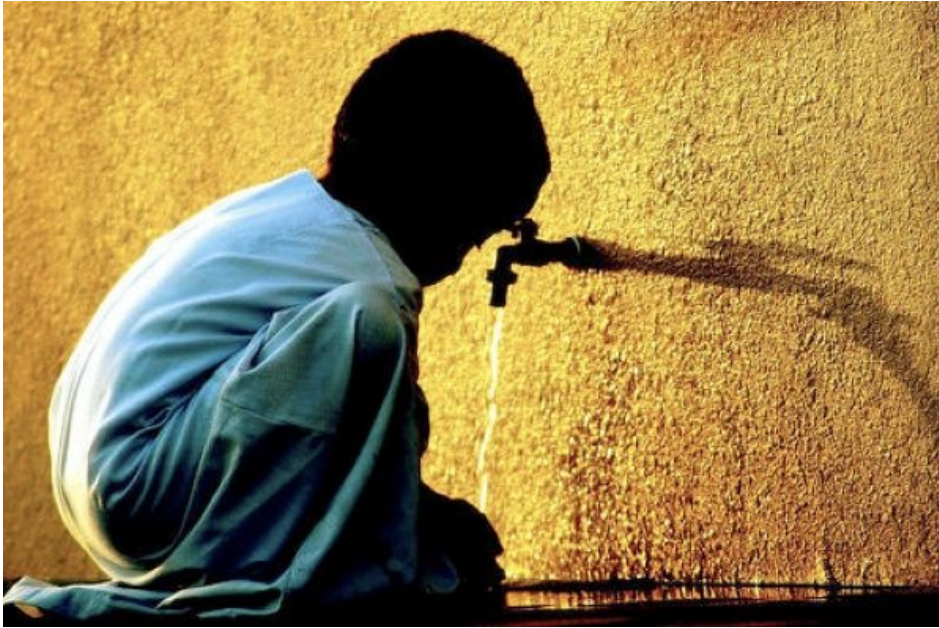
image (<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/google-project-glass-prototypes-offered-google-io-conference/story?id=16663176>)

49. "We should all be worried about the gaping psychological chasm separating humanity from nature" —Scott Sampson, dinosaur paleontologist.
50. That we are becoming too connected. —Gino Segre, professor of physics & astronomy
51. That we will worry too much. —Joseph LeDoux, neuroscientist
52. "What worries me is that we are increasingly enmeshed in incompetent systems, that is, systems that exhibit pathological behaviour but can't fix themselves." —John Naughton, *Edge* editor
53. Too much coupling. —Steven Strogatz, professor of applied mathematics, Cornell
54. That the internet will end up benefiting existing power structures and not society in general. —Bruce Schneier, security technologist
55. That this year's Edge topic has been poorly chosen. —Kai Krause, software pioneer
56. That we will see the end of fundamental science —Mario Livio, astrophysicist
57. The paradox of material progress. —Rolf Dobelli, journalist and author
58. That we will become like rats stuck in a blue marble trap. —Gregory Benford, prof of physics and astronomy
59. That humankind will stop pursuing close observation. —Ursula Martin, computer scientist
60. "What worries me is the ongoing "greying" of the world population, which is uneven globally but widespread." --David Berreby, journalist and author

61. "We should be worrying about a growing dominance of the Fourth [pop] Culture and how it may directly or indirectly affect us all." –Bruce Parker, professor

62. The coming fight between engineers and druids. –Paul Saffo, technology forecaster

63. "As someone fairly committed to the death of our solar system and ultimately the entropy of the universe, I think the question of what we should worry about is irrelevant in the end." – Bruce Hood, mondo-bummer



64. A scarcity of water resources. –Giulio Boccaletti, physicist

65. That we "are inarticulately lost in Modernity. Many of us seem to sense the end of something, perhaps a futile meaninglessness in our Modernity." -- Stuart A. Kauffman, professor of biological sciences, physics, and astronomy

66. " I worry about the lost opportunity of denying the world's teenagers access to education." Sarah-Jayne Blakemore

67. Augmented reality. –William Poundstone, journalist.

68. That big data and new media will mean the end of facts. --Victoria Stodden, computational legal scholar, statistics professor

69. That we will spend too much time on social media. --Marcel Kinsbourne, neurologist

70. That Idiocracy is looming. –Douglas T. Kenrick, psychology professor

71. That the gap between news and understanding is widening. --Gavin Schmidt, NASA climatologist

72. "I worry we have yet to have a conversation about what seems to be a developing "new normal" about the presence of screens in the playroom and kindergarten" --Sherry Turkle, psychologist, MIT

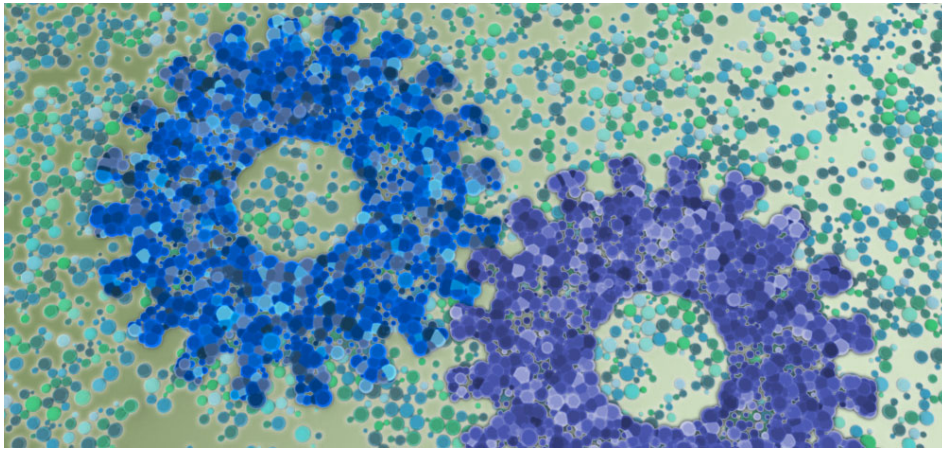
73. "That we will become irrationally impatient with science" --Stuart Firestein, professor who is working as hard as he can, dammit

74. That we will get our hopes up for interstellar space travel, because it's not going to happen. --Ed Regis, science writer

75. That global cooperation is failing and we don't know why. --Daniel Haun

76. That we worry too much. --Joel Gold, psychiatrist

77. "I worry more and more about what will happen to the generations of children who don't have the uniquely human gift of a long, protected, stable childhood." --Alison Gopnik



78. That synthetic biology will spiral out of control. --Seirian Summer, lecturer in behavioral biology

79. The death of mathematics. -- Keith Devlin, mathematician

80. That we will outsource too many skills to machines. --Susan Blackmore, psychologist

81. "We should be worried about online silos. They make us stupid and hostile toward each other." --Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia

82. That we worry too much. --Gary Klein, scientist at MacroCognition

83. That the human species will lose the will to survive. --Dave Winer, Blogging and RSS software pioneer

84. The surplus of testosterone caused by a gender gap in China. --Robert Kurzban, psychologist

85. "A worry that is not yet on the scientific or cultural agenda is neural data privacy rights" --Melanie Swan, systems-level thinker, futurist

86. Armageddon. --Timothy Taylor, archaeologist

87. There's nothing to worry about, even though the Large Hadron Collider hasn't turned up any new discoveries. --Amanda Geffer, editor

88. "What I worry most about is that we are more and more losing the formal and informal bridges between different intellectual, mental and humanistic approaches to seeing the world." - Anton Zeilinger, physicist

89. That we worry too much. --Donald D. Hoffman, cognitive scientist

90. The Growing Gap Between The Scientific Elite And The Vast "Scientifically Challenged" Majority -- Leo M. Chalupa, ophthalmologist and neurobiologist

91. "I worry about the prospect of collective amnesia." --Nogra Arikha, historian of ideas

92. That we worry too much. --Brian Knutson, associate professor of psychology

93. That we do not understand the dynamics of our emerging global culture. --Kirsten Bomblied,

assistant professor of organismic and evolutionary biology



94. "We should worry about losing lust as the guiding principle for the reproduction of our species." –Tor Norretranders, science writer

95. That we worry too much, but about fictional violence. –Jonathan Gottschall, English professor

96. "We should be worried about the consequences of our increasing knowledge of what causes disease, and its consequences for human freedom" –Esther Dyson, Catalyst, Information Tech Startups

97. Natural death. --Antony Garrett Lisi, theoretical physicist

98. "What worries me is that the debate about gender differences *still* seems to polarize nature vs. nurture, with some in the social sciences and humanities wanting to assert that biology plays no role at all, apparently unaware of the scientific evidence to the contrary" -- Simon Baron-Cohen, psychologist

99. The demise of the scholar. --Daniel L. Everett, linguistic researcher

100. The Unavoidable Intrusion Of Sociopolitical Forces Into Science. --Nicholas A Christakis, physician

101. "I am worried about who gets to be players in the science game—and who is left out." – Stephon H. Alexander, physicist

102. "The fact that so many people choose to live in ways that narrow the community of fate to a very limited set of others and to define the rest as threatening to their way of life and values is deeply worrying because this contemporary form of tribalism, and the ideologies that support it, enable them to deny complex and more crosscutting mutual interdependencies—local, national, and international—and to elude their own role in creating long-term threats to their own wellbeing and that of others." --Margaret Levi, political scientist

103, 104. That we will be unable to facilitate effective synergies. --Stephen M. Kosslyn, Robin S. Rosenberg, psychologists, synergy fans

105. I'm not worried about Super-AIs ruling the world. --Andy Clark, philosopher and cognitive scientist

106. The posthuman geography that will result when robots have taken all our jobs. --David Dalrymple, MIT researcher



107. That aliens pose a danger to human civilization. --Seth Shostak, SETI astronomer

108. That the role of microorganisms in cancer is being ignored by the current sequencing strategies employed by the medical community. --Azra Raza, M.D.

109. That humankind's social and moral intuitions will stifle technological process. --David Pizarro, psychologist

110. "The illusion of knowledge and understanding that can result from having information so readily and effortlessly available." -- Tania Lombrozo, assistant professor of psychology

111. The end of hardship inoculation --Adam Alter, psychologist

112. The exploding number of illegal drugs. --Thomas Metzinger, philosopher

113. Superstition. --Matt Ridley, science writer

114. That historically entrenched institutions will prevent technological progress. --Paul Kedrosky, editor



115. That “in one or two generations children will grow up to be adults who will not be able to tell reality from imagination.” --Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, psychologist

116. That we worry too much. --Virginia Heffernan, Yahoo News correspondent

117. “We should be worried about how we go about finding the wisdom to allow us to navigate developments as we begin to improve our ability to cheaply print human tissue, grow synthetic brains, have robots take care of our old parents, let the Internet educate our children” --Luca De Biase, journalist

118. That genomics may fail us when it comes to mental disorders. --Terrence J. Sejnowski, computational neuroscientist

119. “What really keeps me awake at night is that we face a crisis within the deepest foundations of physics. The only way out seems to involve profound revision of fundamental physical principles.” --Steve Giddings, theoretical physicist

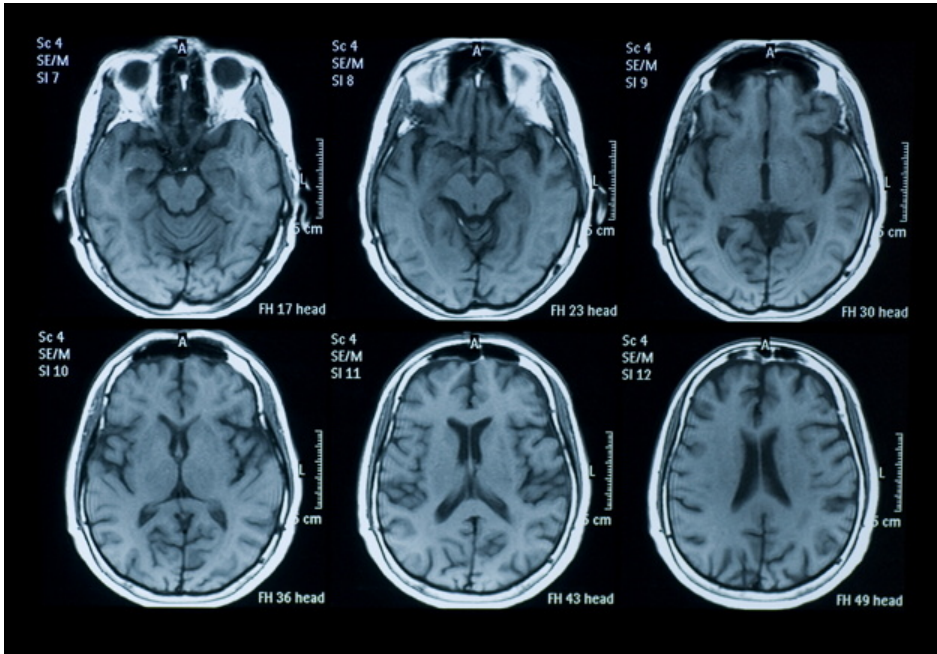
120. “The most worrying aspect of our society is the low index of suspicion that we have about the behavior of normal people.” --Karl Sabbagh, writer, TV producer

121. “Many people worry that there is not enough democracy in the world; I worry that we might never go beyond democracy.” --Dylan Evans, CEO of Projection Point

122. Not population growth, but prosperity growth—the prospect of the entire world consuming resources like Americans and Westerners do. --Laurence C. Smith, geography professor

123. That we’ll begin to treat technology like magic. --Neil Gershenfeld, MIT physicist

124. The rise in genomic instability. --Eric J. Topol, M.D., professor of genomics



[image \(http://assisted-living.benchmarkseniorliving.com/new-scan-may-help-detect-alzheimers-earlier/\)](http://assisted-living.benchmarkseniorliving.com/new-scan-may-help-detect-alzheimers-earlier/)

125. That authorities and companies will soon be able to read people's brains. –Stanislas Dehaene, neuroscientist
126. That economic growth will halt. –Satyajit Das, financial expert
127. "I worry that free imagination is overvalued, and I think this carries risks." –Carlo Rovelli, theoretical physicist
128. That we worry too much. –James J. O'Donnell, classical scholar
129. That we worry too much. –Robert Provine, neuroscientist
130. That we won't have enough robots to do all the jobs we'll need them to do in coming decades. –Rodney A. Brooks, roboticist
131. That we will have no Plan B when the internet inevitably breaks down. –George Dyson, science historian
132. The Singularity. That we "are curiously complacent about life as we know it getting transformed. What we should be worried about is that we're not worried." –Max Tegmark, MIT physicist
133. "There are known knowns and known unknowns, but what we should be worried about most is the unknown unknowns." –Gary Marcus, cognitive scientist
134. That the brain is unable to conceive of our most serious problems. –Daniel Goleman, psychologist
135. "We should be worried that scientists have given up the search for determining right and wrong and which values lead to human flourishing just as the research tools for doing so are coming online" –Michael Shermer, publisher, Skeptic magazine
136. The loss of our collective cognition and awareness. –Douglass Rushkoff, media analyst
137. The decline of the science hero. –Roger Highfield, Director, Science Museum Group
138. That we are unable to identify "the good life." –David Christian, historian

139. Electric tattooing on Facebook and beyond. –Juan Enriquez

140. Federal regulatory capture—ie, the fox watching the hen house in industries like oil and coal extraction. –Charles Seife, journalism professor

141. “Society's Parlous Inability To Reason About Uncertainty” –Aubrey De Grey, Gerontologist

142. That knowledge is getting too fast. –Nicholas Humphrey, prof. at the London School of Economics

143. The "Nightmare Scenario" For Fundamental Physics. Peter Woit, mathematical physicist



image (<http://formerwhitehat.wordpress.com/tag/clones/>)

144. The homogenization of the human experience. –Scott Atran, anthropologist

145. That we won't be able to understand everything. –Clifford Pickover, math author

146. That we worry too much, and “package our worries” in a deleterious fashion. –Mary Catherine Bateson, professor emerita

147. That because of climate change, resource shortages, drones, or other unanticipated reasons, a major war will arise. –Steven Pinker, psychologist

148. Stupidity. –Roger Schank, psychologist

149. I have stopped worrying about the problem of free will, because it will never be settled. –Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education

150. That science is in danger of becoming the enemy of humankind. –Colin Tudge, biologist, editor at *New Scientist*

151. That we will be unable to live without the internet. –Daniel C. Dennet, philosopher

Connections:

[We Are Now One Year Away From Global Riots, Complex Systems Theorists Say](http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/we-are-now-one-year-and-counting-from-global-riots-complex-systems-theorists-say--2)
(<http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/we-are-now-one-year-and-counting-from-global-riots-complex-systems-theorists-say--2>)

[The Rise of the Natural Manmade Disaster \(http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/rise-of-the-natural-manmade-disaster\)](http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/rise-of-the-natural-manmade-disaster)

[What the Next Water War Will Look Like \(http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/what-the-next-water-war-will-look-like \)](http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/what-the-next-water-war-will-look-like)

[How Our Disinterest in 'The Environment' Signals the End of Nature \(http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/how-our-disinterest-in-the-environment-signals-the-end-of-nature\)](http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/how-our-disinterest-in-the-environment-signals-the-end-of-nature)

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
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
Bonze Anne Rose Blayk · Top Commenter · President at Databeast, Inc.
12. That search engines will become arbiters of truth. --W. Daniel Hillis, physicist.
Rapidly becoming the case on Wikipedia....
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Timothy Gallu · Bellefonte, Pennsylvania
Brilliant, funny as hell, terrifying and....well, funny as hell (literally!) I especially like Terry Gilliam's response; "I've given up asking questions. I merely float on a tsunami of acceptance of anything life throws at me... and marvel stupidly." (complete answer)--Terry Gilliam.
It reminds me of my H.S. yearbook quote; " Fearlessly the idiot faced the crowd...smiling." – Pink Floyd.
[Reply](#) · 15 · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · January 17 at 10:25am



Damien Sheehy · Aspley State High School
Not too much about climate change or global warming... interesting :P
[Reply](#) · 7 · [Like](#) · [Follow Post](#) · January 21 at 7:25am



Sophie Mayer · Follow
that is because Edge idea in this questionnaire was to identify new emerging problems that have not been identified yet.
[Reply](#) · 6 · [Like](#) · January 22 at 5:37am



Justin Hensley · Top Commenter · Texas A&M
That's because these were realistic fears. Not some made up fears like Global Warming.
[Reply](#) · 7 · [Like](#) · January 24 at 12:42pm



Greg Holden · Top Commenter



Care to put that statement to the people on that list?

Reply · 21 · Like · January 28 at 11:29am

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Mindaugas Mikulėnas · Follow

So to sum it up – we worry too much about what does not matter and too little about what is going to destroy us, and we're too ignorant to tell the difference or too lazy too care.

Reply · 36 · Like · Follow Post · January 17 at 1:12am



Gonçalo Almeida

Some of them will sound pathetic in 50 years time.

Reply · 9 · Like · Follow Post · January 21 at 1:08pm



John J. Foote · Works at United States Civil Air Patrol
this worries me.

Reply · 1 · Like · January 22 at 12:52pm



María Emilia Ciancio · Top Commenter · Buenos Aires, Argentina
Some already do.

Reply · 6 · Like · January 25 at 5:25pm



Dawn Judd · University of California, Hastings College of the Law
and some will not!

Reply · Like · March 18 at 1:19pm

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Lollie Dot Com · Follow · Top Commenter · Northeastern State University

I'm worried that eventually we'll discover the most harmful thing we ever did to our species was all things medicinal. I fear we're devolving. (I may have just made up that word. If so... DIBS!) :)&--=.

Reply · 2 · Like · Follow Post · July 1 at 4:05pm



Christie Mapes · Mineral Agent at Self Employed Petroleum Landman
You own it now!!

Reply · 1 · Like · July 1 at 4:34pm



Krista Jahnke · Follow · I run the place at Krista jahnke | photography + design |

mine: The increasingly rapid decline of morality and ethics.

Reply · 3 · Like · Follow Post · March 14 at 2:55am



Fabian Moreno · Follow · Germantown, Maryland
How so?

Reply · Like · April 25 at 8:29pm



Johnson Huang
This is the first time I've heard of this rapid decline of morality and ethics. Care to source me?

Reply · Like · May 13 at 2:42am



Red Slider

Very disappointed that there wasn't a single poet invited to respond. Clearly some of the most provocative and interesting responses have been excluded by that unpardonable oversight. My own response would have been:

I worry that I was excluded from being asked to be on the list.

If I had been asked, I might have responded: "I worry that we spend so much time dreaming. about the future of our children, and so little of our waking time insuring that they will even have a future."

Evidence: so many of the things on the list are things we could actually do something about, but don't. – red slider, poet.

Best to you all – Red.

I Dream The Children.

I dream the children yet unborn.
that see the bloom I will not see,
... [See More](#)

Reply · 4 · Like · Follow Post · January 31 at 5:26pm



Luke Goff · Owner at Self Employed and Loving It!
Poets? Really? Bad enough they asked the editor from WIRED to chime in.
Reply ·  2 · Like · May 20 at 4:14pm



Kim Morrison · Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
Very interesting.
Reply ·  2 · Like · Follow Post · January 31 at 12:59am



Jared Lazaro ·  Follow · Im Great at Getting you Clients.
Shared concerns, new ones, old ones... I'm not interested in fear-mongering as some are wont to do... I am curious: Which number(s) are you concerned about, and why?
Any concerns you believe should be on here that aren't listed?
cc: [Vernon](#), [Mark](#), [Johnny](#), [Luke](#), [Caleb](#).
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Side note: There isn't going to be a damnable rise of the Machines, so stop worrying the Terminator is going to break down your door and "Terk Yer Jerb." Worry more about our poor educational system that encourages rote memorization over contextual learning, independent learning, peer-sourcing and lateral thinking. 0_o
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CC: [Joe Trzcinski](#) ;)
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Vernon Bohr Jr. · Proud high school drop out
You don't know that Jared...LOL...What we dreamed, we have created. Maybe not Terminator but maybe Bladerunner. :-)
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