



Essay Review

Turning the Tables on the Tabula Rasa

By David P. Barash

A review of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* by Steven Pinker
509 pp, Viking, 2002.

First, a confession of sorts: For some time now, I've been suspicious of anyone who comes to evolution some time after their primary training. After all, to paraphrase Winston Churchill's observation about the British people and the RAF, never have so many said so much about something they understand so little! All too often, born-again evolutionists tend to conform to a bimodal distribution, either disparaging evolutionary insights – often without understanding them, or even trying to do so - or starry-eyed true believers, whose enthusiasm exceeds their common sense. And so, I was initially leery of Steven Pinker, trained as he was in visual cognition and the psychology of language. His 1994 book, *The Language Instinct*, pretty much dispelled these concerns, sufficiently so that I included a selection from it in my reader, *Ideas of Human Nature* (1998). Next, *How the Mind Works* (1997) caused me to switch from judgementalism to being an eager recipient of Pinker's lovely insights and turns of phrase.

Now, with *The Blank Slate* (2002), I've come all the way: instead of directing skepti-

cism toward a presumed sociobiologic arriviste, I've become an enthusiastic student of a newly-revealed Master. Pinker's thinking and writing are first-rate ... maybe even better than that. *The Blank Slate* is much-needed, long overdue and - if you are interested in what might be called the "human nature wars" - somewhere between that old stand-by, "required reading," and downright indispensable. It is unlikely to change the minds of those who are rigidly committed to the blank slate perspective, but for anyone whose "nature" includes even a modicum of open-mindedness, it should prove a revelation.

Sometimes I read the latest book on human nature simply because I feel obliged to do so, arming myself with a response when friends and colleagues ask my opinion. But some books are far more pleasure than obligation; these I read not only for fun, but also to learn something, if only a nice way of crafting an argument. Pinker is definitely in the latter category, except that he is not only a master phrase-turner, but pretty handy with concepts, too.

He has, for instance, a marvelous facility for explaining things by analogy:

If a gear with a broken tooth goes *clunk* on every turn, we do not conclude that the tooth in its intact form was a clunk-suppressor. And so a gene that disrupts a mental ability need not be a defective version of a gene that is “for” that ability.” Similarly, genes can influence a wide variety of complex traits (altruism, competitiveness, and so forth) without being “for” such narrowly defined phenotypes.

There are supposedly sophisticated biologists – including even some politically motivated geneticists such as Richard Lewontin – who just don’t get this, and, as a consequence, keep asking “Where is the gene *for* altruism?” triumphantly proclaiming that without a one gene-behavior correlation there can be no gene-behavior correlations at all! Haven’t they heard of heritability, of the impact of variations in genotype upon variations in phenotype? Or of the observation that when one allele is substituted for another, the net result is likely to be a mean arithmetic consequence for fitness and often, for phenotype as well.

Another of Pinker’s many neat turns of phrase and concept:

The megalomania of the genes does not mean that benevolence and cooperation cannot evolve, any more than the law of gravity proves that flight cannot evolve. It means only that benevolence, like flight, is a special state of affairs in need of an explanation, not something that just happens.

Indeed, a particularly delightful aspect of *The Blank Slate* is Pinker’s penchant for fresh insights, not to mention suitable and often hilarious quotations dredged up from such unlikely sources as *The Brothers Karamazov*

and Monty Python’s Flying Circus. And he isn’t loath to touch the third rail of cognitive science: intelligence. Consider, for example, this argument (which I fully intend to steal and deploy, if only in conversation, as my own!):

I find it truly surreal to read academics denying the existence of intelligence. Academics are *obsessed* with intelligence. They discuss it endlessly in considering student admissions, in hiring faculty and staff, and especially in their gossip about one another. Nor can citizens or policymakers ignore the concept, regardless of their politics. People who say that IQ is meaningless will quickly invoke it when the discussion turns to executing a murderer with an IQ of 64, removing lead paint that lowers a child’s IQ by five points, or the presidential qualifications of George W. Bush.

Take that, Howard Gardner!

Even an old veteran of the human nature wars such as myself, who feels that by this time he has read or heard everything, gained a slew of new thoughts, phrases, and even genuine ideas. Thus, thanks to *The Blank Slate*, I learned that it was Dryden, not Rousseau, who gave us the noble savage: “I am free as Nature first made man, Ere the base laws of servitude began, When wild in woods the noble savage ran.”

And consider this rather courageous observation about rape; namely, that it would be perfectly compatible with supposedly progressive doctrine – which, after all, argues that human beings are malleable raw material – to suggest that according to prevailing blank slate ideology, women might be socialized to accept rape! This is, of course, absurd and unimaginable, and Pinker knows it: His point is that human beings are equipped with human nature, and that just as part of this nature is that men “want sex across a wider range of circumstances than women do,” and are sometimes

despicably willing to use violence to get it, women abhor being raped. This, too, is almost certainly part of human nature, and for understandable reasons.

“My goal in this book,” writes Pinker, “is not to argue that genes are everything and culture is nothing – no one believes that – but to explore why the extreme position (that culture is everything) is so often seen as moderate, and the moderate position is seen as extreme.” The result is an impressive extended argument for why the blank slate is a bankrupt concept.

As the predictably pithy Pinker points out, “The mind cannot be a blank slate, because blank slates don’t do anything.” For this, he rightly gives Leibnitz due credit (although regrettably omitting Kant), then goes on to show how cognitive neuroscience has further elaborated this important insight. In short: People come pre-formatted, with cognitive organizing principles already embedded in their hardware. Not a ghost in the machine, but some well-oiled gears. Or, at the risk of yet another metaphor, what about a palimpsest?

Pinker’s review of the history of blank slate thinking and the struggle over recognizing human nature is admittedly biased, but nonetheless fair-minded, and – to me at least – altogether convincing, a worthy companion to Carl Degler’s fine historical review, *In Search of Human Nature* (1991).

One quibble, however: It wasn’t only the anti-hereditarians who went “over the top.” Thus, it would have been helpful – and more balanced – had Pinker also included a discussion of extremists of the “instinctivist” school, some of whom are still with us. Particularly under the influence of William McDougall (who was in turn influenced by the flush of enthusiasm for early Darwinism), “instinct psychologists” had by the first decades of the 20th century identified – among others – a parental instinct, gregarious instinct, instincts of acquisition and construction, dominance, companionship, climbing trees, mating, and “purposive striving.” Behaviorism was, in part, a reaction

to this intellectual fashion, as was, to some extent, the culture-is-all school of sociology and anthropology, which Pinker ably chronicles and debunks.

A cognitive psychologist at heart, Pinker is overwhelmingly concerned with making sense of the structure of the human mind; by my count, the word fitness only appears twice in *The Blank Slate* (the book, that is ... fitness considerations are all over the pages of our actual slates, which, it should be clear, aren’t even close to blank). This is OK. After all, Steven Pinker isn’t a biologist. He uses evolution to understand the mind, rather than – like Richard Dawkins, for example – using his mind to understand evolution.

In the process, he demonstrates effectively how three findings occasionally raised in support of a kind of blank-slatism – the comparatively small size of the human genome, neural connectivity theory and accumulating evidence for cerebral plasticity – do nothing of the kind. Thus, to use genome size as an example, the evident fact that *Homo sapiens* appears to boast a mere 34,000 genes has been trumpeted by some as evidence that we must be more free and less genetically constrained than evolutionary theory demands. How nonsensical! As Pinker points out, the roundworm *C. elegans* has a mere 18,000 genes (and only a handful of neurons, not to mention behavior that is less than cosmically inspired). Are we to presume, however, that because it is outfitted with about one-half the human genetic complement, *C. elegans* has twice our free will, or that its behavior is only one-half as “determined”?

In his relentless pursuit of the blank slate, Pinker provides a lawyerly analysis of the major fears that drive its defenders: fear of inequality, of imperfectability, of determinism, and of nihilism. Thus, without the blank slate to hide behind, we must face the troublesome reality that all people aren’t created equal (not in rights, mind you, but in abilities), that we are unlikely to achieve perfection, that we are ge-

netically influenced in what we do, and – heaven forbid – that our lives lack intrinsic meaning.

Despite my strong enthusiasm for *The Blank Slate*, I don't agree with everything Pinker proposes. For example, he asks "Why do secular thinkers fear that biology drains life of meaning?" and then goes on to claim that evolution is compatible with a non-nihilistic view of personal meaning. I think he's wrong here, and that biology *does* in fact tell us that there is no inherent meaning to our lives. We arise following a junction between egg and sperm, no more "meaningful" than any other such conjunctions, on the part of any other species, and, like it or not, we are nothing more than the accumulated products of competing alleles jousting to get ahead. But for me, at least, this isn't a reason for despair, but for achieving meaning – as the existentialists have long suggested – via how we choose to live our lives (Barash, 2000). Existence may not actually precede essence ("human nature," after all, is merely a nucleic acid-based way of talking about the latter), but there is plenty of room for each human existence to establish his or her essence.

In addition to the concept of the blank slate itself, *The Blank Slate* characterizes two other components of the modern human nature mythic pantheon: the myth of the Noble Savage, and of the Ghost in the Machine (or, respectively: empiricism, romanticism and dualism). Along the way, Pinker makes an ingenious argument that these three concepts are in fact mutually compatible. Here again, I don't agree. If the human slate is blank, then common sense suggests that we can't also be noble savages at heart, since our heart is supposed to be blank. (By the same token, blank slate-ism is incompatible with the Hobbesian alternative to our noble savage icon.) A similar incompatibility exists, I would argue, between the silly, soul-y Ghost in the Machine and any pretensions at being a blank slate: if we possess immortal souls, whether benevolent because

fashioned in the likeness of god, or thoroughly despicable and sin-soaked, as claimed by the likes of John Calvin, how can we simultaneously be blank?

But this is beside the point, which is that Pinker has done us all a great service by identifying these three presuppositions ... and then demolishing them.

Steven Pinker's not-so-blank slate is full of indomitable optimism, from Chekhov's "Man will become better when you show him what he is like" (unless perhaps he will become depressed!) to the author's own cheery – and probably correct – assertion that "our understanding of ourselves and our cultures can only be enriched by the discovery that our minds are composed of intricate neural circuits for thinking, feeling, and learning rather than blank slates, amorphous blobs, or inscrutable ghosts."

B. F. Skinner once wrote that a theory cannot change what it is a theory about. In some cases, this is true. It didn't effect the orbit of Jupiter, for example, whether people believed in the Ptolomeic or Copernican versions. But our theories of human nature have the power to affect, dramatically, the way we relate to each other. And maybe even to ourselves.

Thus, Pinker points out that George W. Bush's benighted policy on stem cell research derives from an archaic conception of the Ghost in the Machine, the notion that "ensoulment" occurs when sperm meets egg, thereby presumably rendering each fertilized zygote a human being. And there are implications here for abortion policy, child-rearing, even for politics and the arts. In this regard, I especially appreciated Pinker's lucid exposition of how evolutionary biology and the humanities may yet lead to mutual illumination, a connection long overdue, for example, in the field of literary criticism (Barash and Barash, in press).

One last confession: While finishing *The Blank Slate* and preparing to write this review, I succumbed to multi-tasking and listened with mounting aggravation to the US Congressional "debate" about George W. Bush's de-

mand for authority to go to war with Iraq. In the process, I heard Saddam Hussein repeatedly described as “evil,” and once, as “the perfect embodiment” thereof. Not surprisingly, these sentiments – for sentiments they certainly are, not empirical conclusions – came almost entirely from politicians on the political right, the same group of individuals likely to oppose the blank slate doctrine, disinclined to believe that people are noble savages, and prone to cherish a faith that divine ghosts somehow, somewhere, reside in our bodily machinery. (Just not in Saddam’s!)

Perhaps Saddam Hussein really *is* a psychopath, less a product of his upbringing than of a regrettable assemblage of nasty alleles; most likely, of course, he – like everyone else – is a result, however regrettable, of the interaction his genes and his environment. Much as I am pained to acknowledge it, those Congressional war-mongers, White House chicken-hawks, and other heroic desk-jockeys take a perspective on the blank slate that is

somewhat congenial to Pinker, to myself, and to other sociobiologic debunkers of the myth of infinitely perfectible human nature. Its almost enough to make one yearn for a whiff of the blank slate once again.

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