

'The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial Of Human Nature' by Stephen Pinker

Pinker argues that human nature exists

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By Fred Bortz

In two intriguing earlier books, "The Language Instinct" and "How the Mind Works," Steven Pinker examined the capabilities made possible by the brain.

In his newest book, he expands his terrain in two directions:

*The brain as an organ -- its evolution and structure, its electrical and biochemical properties, and its function within a living organism.

*The entity known as human nature that emerges from the brain's activity.

The second of these is controversial and always has been.

How much of the brain and a person's nature are determined by genes and how much by environment? Can a person's nature or, more generally, human nature be changed?

Is there even such a thing as human nature, or does every newborn human's head house an initially unprogrammed, infinitely malleable living computer?

Pinker's answer to that question is in his title and subtitle. In light of current science, he argues, the concept of a blank slate is an untenable hypothesis. More important, it has become dangerous, leading to misguided, often counterproductive, social and political policies.

From the beginning, Pinker's usual audience is put on notice: This is not strictly a science book but one with clear political and social viewpoints. Since they know him to be an engaging author, they are willing to grapple with him in that new arena, especially when they have scientific threads to follow.

But for most readers, that willingness quickly fades. In the first of five major sections, Pinker discusses not only the blank slate but also its close philosophical relatives, the "noble savage" and the "ghost in the machine."

Is it really worth spending so much time on old doctrines that modern science has long since laid to rest? Our brain is the product of evolution, and that

means our human propensities have had survival value.

The reason for those chapters, Pinker would argue, is that those doctrines, though discredited by science, continue to play important roles in current political thinking, especially on the extremes, and have led us to risky social engineering and policy.

For the rest of the first three sections, making up nearly half the book, science takes a back seat to a blow-by-blow description of unseemly academic squabbling.

Readers are transported back to the late 1960s and 1970s, when political agendas, primarily on the left but also on the right would -- for some academics -- trump both scientific discovery and common sense.

Even worse, though not surprising given "human nature," the arguments turn heated and personal. Accusations and name-calling, spoken in cultured tones by people with sophisticated vocabularies, take political mud-slinging to a new level of repugnance.

It's enough to make even a politically liberal reader agree with George Wallace's description of academics as "pointy-headed intellectuals."

It's enough to make many readers dismiss the book just as the good part is about to get started.

And the good part is very good indeed. After slogging through the sewers of academe, Pinker, whose previous work is so lively and thought-provoking, emerges with fascinating common-sense humanity.

He presents, without the usual heavy political overtones of the genre, his own manifesto on human nature, leaving readers the opportunity to challenge and debate his cogent arguments.

Those who endured the first half of the book, squirming in their chairs wondering when Pinker would get to the point, are now rewarded with discussions that make the book difficult to leave behind.

Pinker's thoughts on hot-button issues, especially, can lead to lively and productive debates about politics, violence, gender, children, and the arts -- assuming, of course, the conversations capitalize on the best of "that infuriating, endearing, mysterious, predictable, and eternally fascinating thing we call human nature."

Fred Bortz, a physicist and children's author, is the winner of the 2002 American Institute of Physics Children's Science Writing Award.

Steven Pinker will speak tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. in the Carnegie Music Hall, Oakland, as part of the Drue Heinz Lectures. Tickets:

412-622-8866.