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BOOKS: WHY SCIENTISTS THINK THE GHOST IS TOAST; THE SLATE ISN'T BLANK AND SAVAGES AREN'T NOBLE -

JOHN MORRISH REPORTS ON THE CURRENT STATE OF THE NATURE VS NURTURE DEBATE

BYLINE: John Morrish Nice table manners don't come easily to a species with genes like ours'

The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature

By Steven Pinker

ALLEN LANE pounds 25

In certain human societies, conflict is endemic. The males fight, for resources and sexual partners, but mostly for glory. The females encourage them. The fighters risk humiliation, but every insult must be avenged. They can't help it. They're academics. Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at MIT, is a lucid and genial writer on language and the human mind. But he also likes a fight. A couple of years ago, he told us *How The Mind Works*, emphasising the ways in which our hunter-gatherer past influences our minds today. But Steven Jay Gould, the alpha male in the popular science section before Pinker wandered in, was unimpressed. "Cocktail party speculation," he said, and tribal war duly ensued.

Pinker and the neo-Darwinians, bolstered by their patriarch, Richard Dawkins, insist that evolution created not just bones and skin but attitudes. The Gould gang, meanwhile, admits that the genes make the bottle, but not the wine. It was nature, in other words, versus nurture. One of the oldest debates of all, and, in the view of some observers, pointless due to lack of evidence. As the *New Scientist* summed it up: "At the end, only one thing was clear: Gould had a bigger dictionary than Pinker."

But to Steven Pinker, nature vs nurture is not a tired or trivial debate. He believes that his side has won it: science proves that we are largely defined, as species and as individuals, at birth. But, he says, no one has thought through the consequences, in psychology, sociology, linguistics, child development, economics, education, criminology, war, the arts, politics and just about everything else. On the book jacket, Pinker still has his Simon Rattle hair, but he's no longer grinning. He looks wary, and with good reason. These are weighty matters, and this is a heavyweight book, and not only on account of its 509 densely typeset pages.

Pinker's thesis is that when educated Westerners stopped believing in God, they turned to a trinity of beliefs, expressed in metaphors. The "Blank Slate" of the book's title suggests that we become ourselves through experience; the "Noble Savage" tells us that without corrupting experiences we would be perfect; and the "Ghost in the Machine" tells us that the physical facts of our brains do not restrict our minds. (Amusingly, Pinker calls the materialist version of this belief the Pronoun in the Machine, because it has no soul but a strong belief that "we" somehow dominate our own brains.)

But Pinker shows us that science has destroyed these beliefs. The slate is not blank: the mind comes with pre-loaded software. Savages are not noble: primitive societies are more violent than our own. And if you fiddle with the brain's wiring, the ghost is toast.

Unfortunately, the feebler the theory, the more fiercely it is defended. Pinker lets them have it: relativists, post-modernists, structuralists, radical scientists, "gender feminists", deconstructionists, all get the Tarantino treatment. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Four bullets ripped into my thesis.

Good riddance, says Pinker. The task now is to establish a new morality and politics on the basis of what evidence tells us is universal and unchangeable in human beings. Drawing rapidly on a huge range of studies, he spells it out for us.

Human nature means a fundamental drive to reproduce. It means concern for mate and offspring first, then for blood relations, and finally for family by marriage and anyone else. Males will be inclined to fight, murder, commit crimes and have sex with numerous women if they can get away with it.

Females, meanwhile, will want children by one mate at a time, and will fight to stop that mate having children with anyone else. People will like beauty, art, stories and music, and they will feel shame and disgust. They will build societies and may even try to avoid war. But they do so because they find that advantageous, not because they think they ought to.

Economics used to be the dismal science. Pinker's patchwork of psychology, anthropology and genetics should really have taken over that title (and his underlying logic of rational self-interest is close to that of economics).

The Blank Slate is not dismal at all, but unexpectedly bracing. It feels a bit like being burgled. You're shocked, your things are gone, but you can't help thinking about how you're going to replace them. What Steven Pinker has done is break into our common human home and steal our illusions.

He tells us, for instance, that it's stupid to believe that we treat strangers well because we're inherently good. In an entertaining passage, he insists we really use "a moral gadget containing a single knob or slider". We have a circle of sympathy, originally restricted to those bearing our genes. But by talking to other people and trading with them, we adjust it so that they are inside. Over time, we move that slider and the circle grows: "You can't kill people and trade with them too," he says. Time, perhaps, for Mr Blair to take out his moral knob and give it a bit of a polish.

The point Pinker is making is that morality, fairness, sex equality, racial tolerance and nice table manners don't come easily to a species with genes like ours. Dynamite among Western liberals, that wouldn't raise an eyebrow in most of the world. Nor, for that matter, would it trouble the denizens of Britain's worst estates, where criminality is assumed to be heritable, where violent self-defence - often pre-emptive - is a necessity, and where it is accepted that young girls are interested in having babies.

None of this means we have to stop striving for fairness and all the rest: it just means we have to stop pretending it comes naturally. Why would it?

We are the winners in an evolutionary contest decided by eating and breeding: no prizes were awarded for good behaviour. These days, after 200 years of soppy Romanticism, "natural" is a word that can sell anything, from muesli to a masochistic form of childbirth. It's "natural" for human beings to be selfish. The point, says Pinker, repeatedly, is that Natural does not mean Right.

This book is like some treat you might buy in a natural food shop, heavy, nourishing, but nutty in parts. Pinker argues like a man in a pub - "And another thing ..." - leaving you muttering "But ..." Many will draw the line at his insistence that parenting has nothing to do with how children work out: it's their genes, their friends or just luck. Regular readings of *The Hungry Caterpillar* don't even register.

Pinker reveres Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* of 1651 made him something of a pariah. He used the best psychology of his day to create a conservative political philosophy, with no wishful thinking. Notoriously, he concluded that the logical form of government was dictatorship. Pinker follows the same method, but comes out for democracy, capitalism, a strong police force and army - and GM food.

He, too, espouses what he calls the "tragic view" of humanity. He tells us that any moral advances we make as a species will come not by singing "Jerusalem", but piecemeal, by work and negotiation. But we'll be better for it. This is the kind of book that intelligent conservatives ought to know well: people like Iain Duncan Smith and

Tony Blair. But because they won't read it, let me paraphrase: We are not Stardust. We are not Golden. And we are not Going to get ourselves Back to the Garden. Now get used to it.