

Human nature

Who's afraid of the new science?

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AT A film your bliss is disturbed by the chatter of small children. What is it, you wonder, about dark rooms and bright screens that loosens little kids' tongues? Then their parents start rabbiting away over the popcorn, and the answer becomes obvious: they taught their spawn to act this way. But hold it, say behavioural geneticists. What if the children inherited a gabby disposition straight from the parents in their cocktail of genes? Learning could well have had nothing to do with it.

Steven Pinker's provocative new book is full of catchy examples like this that he uses to highlight two radically different ways of conceptualising and explaining our behaviour: one with an eye to culture, learning and the social sciences, the other with an eye to nature, genetic inheritance and experiment. He makes no bones about where he stands. Social science and its popularisers have, he thinks, systematically ignored or derided recent strides by neuroscience, artificial intelligence, behavioural genetics and evolutionary psychology. Though he seems to have a point to score or a joke to crack about almost every topic on earth, he makes his main argument persuasively and with great verve.

This is territory where dust soon flies and tempers are quickly lost: remember Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould? Luckily, Mr Pinker rarely loses his cool. "The Blank Slate" ought to be read by anybody who feels they have had enough of nature-nurture rows or who thinks they already know where they stand on the science wars. It could change their minds.

If nothing else, Mr Pinker's book is a wonderfully readable taster of new research, much of it ingenious, designed to show that many more of our emotional biases and mental aptitudes than previously thought are hard-wired or, to use the old word, innate. Further, because humans are genetically speaking a fairly homogeneous species, people the world over are more alike in deep ways that matter than may appear from superficial differences of culture. The book ends with a startling list of more than 300 so-called human universals published originally by Donald Brown in 1991 including not only the presence everywhere of childbirth rites, incest taboos and beliefs about death—we expect that—but, more surprisingly, the existence in all societies of, for example, repertoires of facial expression for a few basic emotions that do not themselves vary from culture to culture.

Confusingly, Mr Pinker gives two reasons why people resist this new science, one more convincing than the other. His weaker explanation is the alleged appeal of three myths: the blank slate, the noble savage and the ghost in the machine. Nobody could consistently hold all three at once, and only the blank slate—an idea famously expressed by John Locke in the 17th century when he called a newborn's mind "white paper devoid of all characters"—is really relevant. Mr Pinker brings in the noble savage—belief in the gentleness of primitive man—and the ghost in the machine—reluctance to abandon an immaterial mind or soul—largely for the polemical fun of torching a few straw men.

The idea of a blank slate came to underpin 20th-century behaviourism, typified by B.F. Skinner, for whom human beings were little more than conditioned automata. It was a working hypothesis of sociology and anthropology that looked for the basis of our beliefs and attitudes in teaching and social practice, not in the contents of the fledgling brain. Blank-slatism reached its nadir, in Mr Pinker's view, in the post-modernist claim that all human attitudes and categories of thought—even gender—are a social construction.

Beyond the two camps

At this point, it would have been neater for a two-camps approach if hard science, as Mr Pinker calls it, were united against the rogues and cretins of cultural relativism in rejecting the blank slate. But, ever honest, he

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature
By Steven Pinker

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admits that the blank slate still has defenders among tough-minded and experimental researchers: in artificial intelligence, "connectionists" who think brains work like neural networks simulated on computers "learning" from statistical patterns with only weak constraints on their inner structure (the near-blank slate); and in neuroscience, defenders of neural plasticity: the view roughly that the brain is a flexible and general-purpose learning device rather than a pre-packed box of specialised tools determined by our genes (the rewritable slate). If truth be told, blank-slate empiricism is still the basis in many experimental psychology departments where the innatism Mr Pinker champions is treated as a dodgy bet.

So if the noble savage and the ghost in the machine are irrelevant, and if even "hard" science disagrees about the blank slate, what is hostility to the new research due to? Fear—Mr Pinker's second answer—is altogether more convincing.

One fear is of inequality. If science shows that our inborn endowments are unequal, will that not legitimise unequal treatment? Another fear is of imperfectibility. If science shows we are less changeable than hoped, will schools and social improvement be pointless? If parental example, as opposed to genes and luck, has little effect on how children turn out, will that encourage indifference and neglect? No, Mr Pinker says, these fears confuse findings of fact with social aims and human values. In sum, he is saying, the new science of man will probably leave most of our moral and political arguments at the starting gate. Not everyone will be so sanguine. But Mr Pinker's approach does show how little of the new research can be squeezed into left-right or liberal-conservative boxes. This is a breath of air for a topic that has been politicised for too long.

Two final points in favour of "The Blank Slate" are these. Unlike many new-science popularisers, the book never underplays the mind's complexity. Nor does it revel in juvenile smugness about the human condition. In one of his best chapters, "The Many Roots of Our Suffering", Mr Pinker suggests that conflict between the drives which evolution has landed us with and the aptitudes that would now help us prosper is probably inevitable. Scientific knowledge can at least aid us in managing this conflict, and denying science will almost certainly make it worse. In the words of Anton Chekhov, one of Mr Pinker's favourites, "Man will become better when you show him what he is like."

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