



Th Human Nature Review 2002 Volume 2: 483-491 (31
October)
URL of this document <http://human-nature.com/nibbs/02/slate.html>

Essay Review

Human Nature and the Limits of Blank Slateism

by

Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair

A review of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*
by [Steven Pinker](#)
Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2002



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Congratulations, Steven Pinker! Had Darwin ever had such an eloquent bulldog we would all be evolutionists today. Had such intellectual bravery been coupled with such extensive scientific literacy and updated multidisciplinary research from the start, we might never have lost sight of the road in the years from 1975-1976 till the end of the eighties. Scientific (sic!) careers have been built on falsehood, posing, and politically motivated aggression. But, as selection forces, they have caused an informed and cognisant opposition – armed not only with fancy words and political correctness, but with reality checks in the form of empirical science (Kennair, 2002b).

So, I repeat: Congratulations, Steven Pinker! With bravery and integrity this book turns every table (and tablet) on those academics who have used their power aggressively to squelch what words claimed could not be, and therefore could not be allowed to be. To those who wish that all their utopian dreams may come true – go to Hollywood! To those who wish that their favourite maps should be truer than the landscape they are supposed to chart – quit science! To those crusaders of truth, who have sailed their ships to where dragons were supposed to be, and found nature as it is – here your uniting banner is planted and we have all reason to thank you! Therefore: Congratulations, Steven Pinker, for returning from the frontier to tell the chronicles and present the empirical maps of the true and brave new world!

If we all make claims about human nature, what is all the fuss about?

Has any theorist ever written a book that does not implicitly describe human nature? I have not read every book written, of course, but I cannot think of any. If you can – tell me about it! Can any book that implicitly infers a human nature really have described a blank slate? Surely anything that falls into the category: humans are/ have/ can/ will/ must/ do/ do not/ cannot/ etc. will be a statement about a species specific trait. A species is biologically described. The biology of a species is first and foremost genetic. Thus, there is no way such statements are not claims about innate human nature. So, what is all the fuss about?

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[Donald Symons](#) (1987) asked “If we’re all Darwinians, what’s all the fuss about?” Most academics are Darwinians – or more correctly, they believe that evolution is the process that best describes how man came to be. But they cannot accept that this means that our minds are also a result of evolution – unless one can claim that they grew big and wonderful and can do anything they want today because of evolution. But evolution has never built such a supernatural contraption. Thus one is stuck – and ideologies and common sense are used to argue against scientific findings. Even against the proposal to do scientific research on such themes.

Pinker focuses on three ideological dogma or myths – falsehoods – which inform academic theories of human nature. First, the blank slate – the idea that the environment is the major influence of human nature – if not the only influence. Most often, lip service is paid to innate structure, but thereafter anything is possible for the unlimited human mind to learn, given the right environment. Second, the ghost in the machine – the idea that the soul, psyche or mind is divided from matter, body and brain. Usually this is merely referred to as dualism – it sets up a division between man-animal, mind-brain, psychology-neurology, etc. This is one of the great disasters of Western thinking, and gets in the way of a lot of human happiness. I will return to this below on the theme of psychopathology. Third, the noble savage or romanticism – the idea that what is natural is good, unblemished – untainted by society.

Two of these three can be seen throughout Western or Judeo-Christian history: The soul or psyche is a butterfly or dove, it enters and leaves the body. In the beginning, in the garden of Eden, we were perfect. The third was more radical – the blank slate is a democratic blow to feudalism – but also suited every social movement of indoctrination from Loyola to Mao.

But the mind is not like this – human nature does exist. At the same time our culture is founded on the idea that we may be exactly what we are fashioned to be, by *sui generis* culture or state policies. Not in an Orwellian nightmare but in a happy utopia – let’s go sailing! Further, we believe that society has failed when we turn out bad, because we ought to be turning out good – as we were good from the beginning, because all things natural are good. Finally, our minds are beyond science – no one can research the mind! The mind is God-like, it is ephemeral, it is subjective, it is social – in no way is it bound by matter and biology. Anyone who studies our brains and claims they study our minds is therefore a reductionist, atomist, realist, materialist, nihilist and determinist – words, words, words, that few understand, but all can whirl, flourish and brandish to attack what steps on their sore toes or insults their sensitive politics... and ideas of Human nature. Therefore there is fuss! A lot of it! More than fuss – there is war!

The notorious last chapter of “Sociobiology” revisited, refurbished and revitalised

E. O. Wilson (1994) was not, when he published *Sociobiology*, an intellectual or political activist – he was a researcher of ants. He was neither a psychologist. Had he been all of these, sociobiology would have caused an even greater impact on modern research than it has – and let there be no doubt: it has (Alcock, 2001). Alas, poor Wilson, was a victim of two disasters within academia. First, what he wrote provoked the most influential, aggressive and active political academics because they held ideological beliefs they thought might inform science, and Wilson’s musings did not correspond to these. Second, those who should have supported the project were not able to because they were not doing the research at the time – most psychologists do not view humans as animals and are theoretically committed to environmentalism, even today. Also, I believe [Cosmides and Tooby’s](#) (1987) essay on evolutionary psychology as the missing link, had to come along to put things straight – the focus must be on the mental mechanism not the behaviour, and every species explained on its own terms. The paradigm of sociobiology is better suited for ants than for human beings.

Pinker therefore steps onto the scene armed with the hindsight Wilson was not able to assume. Further, since 1987 research on human nature has blossomed. This does not mean that all questions are answered, but it does mean that we now know that what was claimed impossible in the 70’s now proves to be true. Pinker is well read, eloquent and has the upper hand because the opposition do not know the facts.

Now, as [Bruno](#) might have pointed out, being correct does not mean that the inquisition will not kill you. Most often being right is not worth much. More important is communicating with the audience – as Ibsen pointed out. Wilson failed at this. Pinker has got a greater chance of managing this, although some of his claims have almost all commentators reeling. Such as the ludicrous statement that parenting does not make children’s personalities similar, actually parenting does not influence personality development in any way that we have been able to measure. The problem again is that it is not a question of being correct or not – Pinker is, the commentators are not – but this is so counterintuitive that it is almost impossible to accept, or communicate.

Whether Pinker actually manages to persuade the general academic audience that indeed genetics, evolution and neuroscience are fields that they ought to be aware of may be one measure of the success of the research performed and the theoretical development since Wilson and Dawkins crashed unwarily onto the stage of politics with their accounts of how biology matters. What is pretty clear is that no philosophy that is anti-biological, biologically agnostic or biologically naïve can describe human nature (Kennair, 2002c). For me, Pinker heralds that the suppression of evolutionary and genetic approaches to the study of human nature was a Pyrrhic victory – those involved lost their innocence and scientific integrity to a theory built on myth and false hypotheses of how the human mind really is designed.

Two recent books on human nature

[John Dupré](#) is a respected philosopher of biology. At the same time he does not believe much in a biological human nature, and finds that the focus on genes within evolution is exaggerated. His latest book “Human Nature and the Limits of Science” (Dupré, 2001; see Kennair, 2002a, for a review) is in many ways the latest and most unashamed example of the theories and theorists Pinker exposes in “The Blank Slate” (although Pinker does not mention Dupré – and that is fair enough, it would not have been worth his time).

Dupré amuses the reader by ridiculing *bona fide* science, which he has not actually read properly, and therefore not really understood – even though he was present at it’s birth (Dupré, 1987, included the breakthrough article by Cosmides and Tooby). Among the topics Dupré addresses is the naturalistic fallacy. Many have attempted to split science from policy and tip-toed away from open controversy and the destructive (of their careers) politicising of their science. Pinker dares not to – and goes in for a counter-attack. Of course our knowledge is relevant for policy! All the more so than the mediocre musings and sage sayings of the ideologically rather than scientifically informed.

There are two ways to use science to influence policy. One way is to make bombastic and totalitarian statements based on what is politically correct, and add “it is not scientific” to any statement that fails to confirm utopian ideology. A prime example is to be found in the Seville Statement on the biology of war (it may be found at: http://www.unesco.org/human_rights/hrfv.htm). The problem with such statements, as Pinker shows, is that they have no legs to stand on to defend moral positions, if these depend on empirical outcomes. The history of science seems to indicate that such pet-positions are put down sooner or later.

The other way is to inform our policy makers of how the world really is, and decide how to best accomplish how we want matters to be, given the way human nature actually functions. For this to work, there must not be taboos on scientific inquiry – ideas must not be deemed unthinkable. And claims of whether something is scientific or not must wait until *after* the research is performed.

Re-reading Dupré after reading Pinker is quite interesting. I do not agree with every flavour and detail of Pinker’s own taste of politics and personal conclusions – but the major theses were known to me prior to reading the book. And I agreed with them. Still, the force of Pinker’s argument structures this information in a more self-assured manner, and the lame and unsubstantiated arguments of “Human Nature and the Limits of Science” seem utterly hopeless now. The idea that human minds are fundamentally different due to culture *is* a racist idea, the environmentalism that lays behind such thinking a *false* paradigm, and the results of such thinking are potentially more dangerous than anything any mainstream evolutionary psychologist has offered on race.

I am already looking forward to see what Pinker's opposition will come up with in years to come. No book on human nature is going to be able to avoid confronting Pinker's arguments – but if one may rise above one man and his book – the major point must be: the *research* that Pinker refers to needs to be addressed by future books on human nature.

The Case of Psychopathology and Psychotechnology

There is one hot button Pinker did not press. He is aware of it (p. 281), so it is not due to him not being aware of the problem – rather I suppose it is due to differences of priority. I would absolutely include an analysis of how we treat and understand mental disorder based on empiricism, romanticism and dualism.

One of the battlefields on which the war between the doctrines of the blank slate, noble savage and ghost in the machine is daily played out in reality is within clinical psychology and psychiatry. Here it is not a case of mere academic games – those involved here are clinicians, supposedly bound by an ethical onus to provide their patients with the best possible treatment, and real people, who suffer from mental disorders that steal years of their lives and also empty them of meaning and pleasure. A mental disorder provides pain and restrictions. Mental disorder is not something we need to grow emotionally or intellectually – it usually stunts both intellectual and emotional powers.

In a current article (Kennair, Aarre, Kennair & Bugge, 2002) we try to provide an analysis – that in many ways corresponds to Pinker's – of the resistance toward adopting a scientific approach to the treatment of mental disorder. Actually we argue that the mere idea that one may study mental disorder and the treatment of mental disorder scientifically is blocked by Cartesian dualism.

Further almost every idea of how we develop mental disorders take a blank slate approach. Mowrer's two-factor theory, Beck's aetiology of depression, psychodynamic/ Freudian etc. models of personality development – they are all based on empiricism. They are all theoretical models, and once they are being tested scientifically they seem to be falsified rather than supported (e.g. Kendler, Myers & Prescott, 2002, for the theory most would expect was as scientific as anything within psychology – two-factor theory *cannot* explain why we develop anxiety. Behavioural genetics takes care of most cognitive and psychodynamic models of personality). All the same they have governed the way clinicians have understood disorders. Add the romantic-empiricist idea that one has to go back to early childhood to find the cause of the pathology, for many these ideas have become a reason to blame parents and focus on narratives rather than assailing the current reasons for continued suffering. Good therapy intervenes on what is maintaining the symptoms.

The total picture becomes even more frustrating when methods and theories of how to treat mental disorder are viewed as impossible to study scientifically. This week I have been approached by two editors wanting me to write something on evidence-based mental health care – one with the claim that all they receive are contributions arguing against an evidence-based approach. This is typical of the field. Ask almost any clinician within psychiatry and clinical psychology – you will be told the same: the methods I use are the best, they do really work, but it is impossible to document such effects scientifically – that would demand reducing or materialising or somehow distorting the practice. There are no polite ways to counter such claims. Such research is being performed every day – it is far from impossible!

Research is set aside, and inspiration, intuition and the saying of sages and experts rule what is true and good – does it sound familiar? Many, even evolutionary psychologists and biological psychiatrists, will claim that psychotherapy cannot be studied scientifically. They accept no standards within mental health care, but would never condone low standards within somatic treatment! There is ample arrogance in the dogma of dualism and romanticism.

Further, the improvement of biochemical interventions, has caused two contrasting simplicities. The one is the obvious romanticism that pain is to be overcome and is natural and must in no way be subdued or white-washed by medicine. This one also comes with a dualistic flavour – it won't work, really, because the mind is not biochemical. The other ditch is that everything is biochemistry – only, and no other interventions work, because they are not real... a dualism that cannot include

psychotherapy, because words and relations are not material (sic!). The theoretical and philosophical lacuna that these false ideologies of human nature cause are quite dramatic in this real world arena of human suffering!

Obviously, and I expect that Pinker will be told the same – using Cartesian dualism in such a manner will be considered philosophically ingenious – that is only another way of saying that Gould's dictionary was bigger, not that what he said was truer. Also, and this is the most interesting: advocating, as we do and Pinker does, the inclusion of biology (we argue in favour of a biopsychosocial approach), will cause comments that one is claiming that biology is everything (sic!). It has happened already – it is not paranoia.

The area of mental health and mental health policy is one of the major casualties of Pinker's terrible trio. It is my firm belief that once we understand human nature and the natures of psychopathology we will be better equipped to cure the suffering of mental disorder. The tragedy is that first we need to fight well-meaning, but out-dated and ideologically challenged colleagues and policy makers. Surprisingly enough the public in general, that has not been confused by university education is often better informed, they read about what works on the Internet. I hope Pinker's argumentation is expanded to clinical psychology and psychiatry – as these are areas in which change of thought will directly cause an improvement of health and a reduction of human suffering. Few of the hot buttons Pinker actually did press have similar effects.

What do people say?

I seem to be a slower reader than many. In any case, many reviewers have beaten me to the press – which means that I get to comment on a few of their comments (Pinker has made it very easy for us to read most of these reviews, good and bad, at: <http://www.mit.edu/~pinker/slate.html#reviews>):

Alas, [Mary Midgley](#) (*Guardian*, Sept. 21) has not yet understood the selfish gene theory – even after Richard Dawkins went out of his way to give her extra tutoring ([Dawkins, 1981](#)). Still she sees it as a conspiracy of imagery that Social Darwinists use to advance their economic politics. Did she read Pinker? Her most true comment is on the length of the book – it is rather long, and would be more readily available in a shorter version – even if I should like to see a section on the treatment of mental disorder included. Maybe it grew to long, and the chapter on imagery was skipped? Midgley concludes that minds work as a whole, and therefore Pinker's model of the mind is wrong. Midgley is obviously an authority on the political issues of the language of scientific metaphors and models, but she seems to need to read a little neuroscience – maybe the split-brain research of Sperry which every introductory psychology textbook attempts to explain in understandable language. (Oddly enough, when describing autism even the great Gould (1997) found that the mind was modular, and surely the most famous modular position on autism is Baron-Cohen's (1995) evolutionary psychology approach)

Marek Kohn (*The Independent*, Sept. 14, available at <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/marek.kohn/slate.html>) is on a different track with one of the best written critical reviews. Oddly enough I perceive him of making exactly the same mistake that he chides Pinker of making. His evolutionary left want to have their cake and eat it too. He believes that he can both attack Pinker for not going all the way – and at the same time accept only a limited human nature himself... and opts in the end for an empty vessel metaphor. It has been used before. It is as empty as the blank slate – or, more precisely, it never was nor will be empty just as the blank slate never was.

David Barash (2002), in the *Human Nature Review*, makes the following claim: the myths of romanticism, empiricism and dualism ARE mutually exclusive. I agree. But that would demand being logical. Logic, consistency or coherence is hardly typical of ideological positions – such as the two described above. Thus one may combine ideas of people being depressed strictly due to environmental factors, not biology, believe that this is a natural state that most have to learn how to deal with to grow as humans (sic!), and that biological or chemical interventions are both ineffective and unnatural (sic! sic! sick...). Barash's last example of incompatibility is not correct, though – Pinker

actually explains this one (p. 11), and we find it time and a time out there: the ghost fills the empty vessel. The emptier, the easier.

Mark Ridley (*The Times*, Sept. 4) is positive, but is also a sceptic – that is fair enough, as long as scepticism is not informed by the theses Pinker is trying to expose... I wonder why animal evolutionary psychology is more convincing than human evolutionary psychology. I am tempted to call this a form of dualism. I go with Geoffrey Miller (2000) – mate selection is all about the evolutionary advantage of certain traits as they are perceived by the mental abilities of females.

Matt Ridley (*The Telegraph*, Sept. 9), less sceptical, offers the one criticism that Pinker implies that we know more about human nature than we really do. This is probably true – but there was no way of avoiding it: If you claim that someone is wrong, those listening will perceive that you are implying that you know more (Also known as the Jeopardy effect – the guy asking the questions and deciding who is right and wrong is perceived as more intelligent and knowledgeable than the competitors). But Matt Ridley is correct: We do not know it all, we know very little indeed – but what we do know is enough to defrock the high priests of dualism, blank slateism and the idea that something natural (like depression) is better than something chemical (like SSRIs).

Simon Blackburn (*New Scientist*, Sept. 4), the philosopher, notices that Pinker is on one side of a controversy – the experts cannot decide, it seems, whether television causes violence or not. What Blackburn does not recognise is that the controversy is rooted in ideology, and he makes the wonderful mistake of viewing the American Psychological Association as on the side of science and Pinker. He might rather have mentioned the American Psychological Society, I believe chances for support may be greater there, although still slim. Further, “the experts” are social constructions – stop listening to experts, Blackburn, and look at the research and the numbers! I do not know what the research and numbers will tell us – but they speak the truth; the experts voice mere opinions.

John Morrish (*The Independent on Sunday*, Sept. 29) makes the same mistake in a most amusing report – where people draw the line, in what influences what children turn into as adults, is not interesting. People draw lines all over the place – in the future we must hope that empirical results are the judge and jury of truth.

Do I have anything critical to say?

Of course I do. The book consists of several hundred pages of statements, some of which are Pinker's personal opinions. I do not agree with all his tastes and all of his personal politics – some of the reason for this is that Europeans and Americans view things like the death penalty quite differently. But these are details – if I find his politics somewhat American and thereby reactionary by European and especially Norwegian standards that is hardly an argument against his thesis. This may, however, make it harder to convince a non-American audience.

What does catch my more critical eye might be the way Pinker makes every similarity between twins in behavioural genetic studies sound like evidence of genetic influence. And he has done this before – and the documentation did not convince me then either (Pinker, 1997). If two women marry firemen called Bob, is this anecdotal, is it accidental – a random effect. If one checks everything two people do: twirl necklaces, hum in elevators, marry firemen called Bob – could it be that some of these thousands of observations had been as likely among non-twins, but when looking for similarity the most amazing traits pop out? I am more in favour of using less anecdotal evidence. Behavioural genetics is such smashing science, it does not need to use anything that could look like a Barnum effect. In my opinion, some tricks make it more like a circus.

An End to the Discussion?

Pinker's book is not going to end any discussion. It has presented evidence and arguments that ought to make most theorists rephrase their ideas and hypotheses, but most likely they will only do so reluctantly – and over the course of time. But first Pinker is going to get the full treatment of scorn, name calling, ridicule and academic and political ostracism. Commentators have already spent time on his hair and clothes, it is harder to make fun of his academic credentials. Calling him a Nazi is

neither as easy as it was for previous targets of such sophisticated flack. But the discussion, or war, will flare in months to come.

And something has changed. It probably had previous to Pinker's book, as we saw in the massive rally to the banner of truth, common decency and real science following the publication of Tierney's (2000) concoction of imagination and politically motivated ideological warfare (see <http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/eldorado/> for a collection of replies to Tierney).

The change is found in the broad, multidisciplinary coalitions of empirical scientists who have studied human nature at many different levels of analysis – and who find that the truth is consilient. Further, the “truths” and strategies of those opposing evolutionary or genetic approaches to the study of human nature have not evolved. They have stagnated – they might end up extinct. And therefore we may still hear about research that finds correlations between parent and child behaviour – and neither the researchers nor the funding agencies stop to ponder whether these correlations are caused by the parents' behaviour or influenced by their shared genes. Also, therefore, we may still read uninformed oracles of mainstream academic establishment dish out criticism of *bona fide* research. Research that they have not read and do not comprehend. At the same time the evolutionary and genetically oriented researchers have developed the most sophisticated methods of researching environmental factors (see Plomin et al., 2000). Further, they have discovered both limits and features of human nature through empirical research. Finally, like Pinker, they have read and are well aware of the philosophies, politics, myths and fantasies of those in favour of blank slates or malleable minds, ghosts in their machinery or wish we were noble savages.

In the future one may hope that journal editors, funding agencies and science journalists learn what they actually are taught. I will mention five obvious points: First, correlation studies do not indicate cause. Second, human behaviour is influenced both by genetic and environmental factors – thus not checking for one of these is sloppy science. Third, if children resemble their parents the most likely cause is genetic. Fourth, a natural science approach to mind and human behaviour is possible. Fifth, mentioning the concepts of “genetic” or “evolutionary” is not a marker of Social Darwinism, eugenics, fascism, biological determinism or poor science. One could of course compile a longer list – but these five would make a great difference to the quality and publication of research.

The findings and theories Pinker has collected and structured are too important for science and health policy makers to avoid noticing. I remind everyone that psychopathology and the treatment of mental disorder ought to be a part of this analysis. The hard work ahead of us is teaching those whose minds have been marinated in environmentalism that not only are the intuitively radical findings of behavioural genetics true, but they actually are the middle way – and in this case the true way!

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Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair is Chief Psychologist at Nordfjord Psychiatric Centre, N-6770 Nordfjordeid, Norway.


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Citation

Kennair, L. E. O. (2002). Human Nature and the Limits of Blank Slateism. *Human Nature Review*. 2: 483-491.

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