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Not Silly Putty**The Blank Slate**

The Modern Denial of Human Nature

by Steven Pinker

Viking. 528 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by

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WHY IS the idea of an inborn human nature so controversial? What does it imply about how our society should be organized, about our conceptions of equality and justice, about education, religion, the media, the arts? Would we really be better off if there were no such thing as human nature or if we chose to ignore it? These are the questions Steven Pinker tackles in a passionately argued defense of the thesis that the natural history of our species places powerful constraints on who we are and how we think.

Pinker, a professor of psychology at MIT, established his academic reputation by studying how children acquire the rules of grammar. His first nonacademic book, *The Language Instinct* (1994), was acclaimed for its lucid and witty explanation of an ability that is so central to the human experience that few of us have ever thought about how it works. At heart, however, *The Language Instinct* is about what is both common and unique to human beings. Observed Pinker:

Modern intellectual life is suffused with a relativism that denies that there is such a thing as a universal human nature, and the existence of a language instinct in any form challenges that denial.

Since writing that sentence, Pinker has marshaled a panoply of other evidence to support this challenge. He laid out much of it in *How the Mind Works* (1998), a more ambitious and somewhat more tedious volume that touched on topics ranging from color vision to phobias and sexual attraction—all allegedly part and parcel of human nature, as designed by natural selection and illuminated by the reverse-engineering method of evolutionary psychology.*

One of the strong implications of this argument is that the human mind works in much the same way for everyone, because all human beings have relatively recent common ancestors. Another is that when there are differences across individuals, some (but not all) of these must have genetic origins, since variation in genes is the grist for evolution by natural selection.

Both *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works* were aimed at convincing the reader that the human mind has a surprisingly rich innate structure, with various modules custom-built by evolution to serve specific adaptive functions like speaking, seeing, and reproducing. In both of them, Pinker lobbed his arguments with verve and alacrity at the most popular alternative view: that the mind is essentially silly putty, and that commonalities and differences in how people think can be traced to commonalities and differences in their environments. Clearly, if Pinker's program is on the right track, that idea is wrong-headed. In *The Blank Slate*, the third installment of the trilogy, he now endeavors to tell us why it is also destructive and dangerous, at least insofar as it is believed by so many of those who occupy the rarefied strata of our intellectual elites.

This is not, indeed, a task taken on lightly. Questioning the Blank Slate—which is how Pinker refers to the 'silly putty' view—is more than unpopular; for many, it is seen as bordering on immoral. And woe betide those accused of the heresy of biological determinism, which has come to stand for any suggestion that genetic factors play a role in shaping patterns of human behavior. Scientists who study the heritability of traits like intelligence and aggressiveness, or who advance evolutionary explanations for some aspects of cognition, are commonly denounced as racist (or fascist or sexist), picketed, harassed, and sometimes assaulted by protesters.

Even scientists who largely agree with Pinker's point of view have chastised him publicly for bringing up the topic—evidently either because they fear that discussing human nature in a popular book will generate misunderstandings, or because they are simply unwilling to believe that anyone still takes the Blank Slate seriously. Pinker, however, believes that the Blank Slate has had socially and morally disastrous consequences, and he devotes the considerable force of his talent to demolishing it.

PINKER BEGINS by laying out what he takes as the central tenets—and obvious flaws—of the Blank Slate theory as well as of its two most important corollaries, the Noble Savage and the Ghost in the Machine.

According to Pinker, the Blank Slate is demonstrably false. Discoveries in neuroscience have shown that the mind comes equipped with various specialized functions, including those responsible for learning languages, estimating numerical

quantities, picking out objects in the world, and attributing thoughts and intentions to other human beings. Some of these systems, moreover, vary from person to person in ways that are influenced by the genes. Behavioral geneticists have shown that about half of the variability in a trait like IQ is biological in origin, confirming the long-held suspicion that all other things being equal smart people tend to have smart children.

This is not to say that environmental factors play no role in determining how an individual mind works: Japanese babies do not learn Japanese if their parents speak English. But even if the contents of the mind are subject to alteration, the slate itself cannot be blank; if it were, nobody would learn any language, or possibly anything at all.

What goes for the Blank Slate goes also for its two corollaries, if with certain qualifications. The doctrine of the Noble Savage holds that man in the state of nature is happy and peaceful; our present miseries, therefore, arise from the corrupting defects of our institutions. To this doctrine Pinker credits a number of bromides that enjoy wide currency, among them the notions that crime is caused by discrimination or abuse; that gender roles are learned; and that violent behavior can be picked up from television and video games. But there is no empirical support for these ideas, and in any case anthropology has discredited the Noble Savage. Extensive field research shows that pre-state societies have far higher rates of violence than do societies with strong governing institutions, and are plagued by almost constant warfare.

The Ghost in the Machine is a special case. It corresponds roughly to the idea that our behavior is controlled by something other than the activity of our brains. Philosophical dualists believe that we are made of two kinds of stuff: physical stuff—the body—and thinking stuff, identified variously as the mind, conscious will, or the soul.

If *this* were true, however, it would be pointless to study the brain for clues about our (mis)behavior. Most behavioral scientists today reject the dualist distinction, operating instead on the assumption that thought is reducible to physical processes. Still, dualism in one form or another is notoriously difficult—and probably impossible—to disprove empirically. Moreover, though Pinker sees dualism as allied with the Blank Slate, it is in fact compatible with almost any theory about what constitutes human nature—provided one has an account for how the ghost got in the machine in the first place.

IN PINKER'S view, the Ghost in the Machine arises out of one of our deepest anxieties about studying human nature: namely, the fear that free will may turn out to be only an illusion, as it would seemingly have to be if our behavior is determined by nothing more than electrical activity in the brain. Pinker writes that the persistence of theories like the Ghost, the Savage, and the Slate is related to this kind of existential anxiety: the fear that our lives have no meaning or purpose; the fear that all men are not really equal; the fear that our nature, if it exists, is deeply and permanently flawed.

In the second part of the book, Pinker takes on these fears in turn. A biological understanding of human nature should actually *enrich* our sense of purpose, he writes, by illuminating the adaptive mechanisms that produce both the sweetness of fruit and our sense of right and wrong. Our political ideals are also safe: the fact that human beings are not literally equal does not justify discrimination; it does, however, force us to think about the tradeoff between freedom and material equality, and about how to ensure that the talented are not punished while the less fortunate are not cast down. That is certainly preferable to the ideology of the Blank Slate, which can license any number of perverse injustices committed in the name of equality. For example, if people do not differ in their innate endowments, anyone who is better off (say, kulaks and bourgeoisie) must be greedy and evil—fair targets for liquidation.

Pinker does not claim to have solved the problem of free will, but he does make the case that we do not need dualism in order to hold people accountable for their actions: even if biology influences our behavior, every decision we make is the product of fine-tuned cognitive and emotional mechanisms designed to weigh temptation against the possibility of punishment. This is an argument, Pinker thinks, not for throwing up our hands in the face of iniquity, but rather for taking criminal justice seriously. To those worried that giving up the Ghost absolves wrongdoers of responsibility for their actions by chalking up sin to biology, Pinker poses the alternative of *environmental determinism*, the popular but ultimately ridiculous idea that antisocial behavior can be explained, and excused, as the result of a troubled childhood—or, as the Jets in *West Side Story* put it, *we're deprived on accounta we're deprived*. This hardly seems more appealing.

Of course, one would still like to understand *why* human beings are sometimes depraved; why, sometimes, we are selfish, irrational, violent, and bigoted. The final chapters of *The Blank Slate* are devoted to plumbing some of these mysteries with the help of the theory of natural selection. Cultures of *honor*, for example, emerge when government—and the threat of deterrence—is weak, as it is in inner cities and frontier zones. In such cases, individuals (usually men) often resort to violence to protect their social status, which is a proxy for their ability to provide for their families and hence for their attractiveness as mates. Even an extreme behavior like rape may be a kind of last-ditch strategy for the propagation of the rapist's genes.

Again, Pinker takes care to argue that evolutionary success does not equal moral justification. For him, morality must be based on a fundamental regard for the interests of each and every human being; it follows that we ought to punish cheaters who harm or exploit others for their own advantage. Indeed, the visceral moral sense that some acts are wrong may itself have been cobbled together from bits and pieces of more ancient instincts, like the one that instills disgust for sickening foods and sources of contamination.

In Pinker's view, in sum, our evolutionary history has saddled us with a host of more and less problematic quirks, ranging from gang violence to teenage angst and even to the widespread popularity, much lamented by art critics, of realist landscape paintings. (Supposedly these depict environmental conditions that were preferred over the course of human evolution.) Understanding these biases will not make them go away, but it will better equip us to make sometimes difficult choices, both in our personal lives and in the political sphere.

PINKER is one of those rare writers who is at once persuasive and comprehensive, informative and entertaining. His argument is illuminated by science, and lots of it but also by literary excerpts, references to popular culture, cartoons, occasional Yiddishisms, and personal anecdotes. (For instance, it seems that Pinker lost his faith in anarchism after the Montreal police strike of 1969 led to widespread looting and destruction of property.) In short, Pinker uses everything he can think of to make the case for an inborn and largely immutable human nature. For the most part, he succeeds.

But some aspects of his argument are more credible than others. His discussion of the origins of aggression and violence, for example, is backed up by a long tradition of research in anthropology and comparative psychology. By contrast, his discussion of the origins of morality is rather more speculative, and rather less convincing.

There are also points at which he is needlessly if revealingly antagonistic. In a chapter on gender, Pinker admonishes the bioethicist Leon Kass for suggesting that many women are unhappy postponing marriage to pursue careers. To Pinker, this somehow amounts to a dubious and unacceptable infringement of women's choices. Yet he himself makes similar points later in the same chapter, arguing that women are less interested than men in career advancement and should not be condemned for choosing to spend more time raising families than hammering at the glass ceiling. Natural selection, after all, makes it so: men are designed to invest heavily in social status (in order to attract women); women are designed to invest heavily in their offspring.

Pinker takes pains to remind readers that his arguments are not meant to justify sex discrimination far from it: he means only to point out that the kind of sexual parity favored by radical feminists may end up harming many women. So why does he not give the same benefit of the doubt to Kass, whose only substantive difference from Pinker on this point seems to be that he has failed to consider the dynamics of mating among australopithecenes? (The answer, one supposes, is that Kass belongs to a species even more suspect than environmental determinists; he is a political conservative.) In a sense, it hardly matters whether differences between the sexes arose because of natural selection or for some other reason. The point is that there *are* differences between the sexes, and they cannot be erased or ignored without consequence.

FROM A pragmatic point of view, the most serious weakness of Pinker's thesis is its reliance on the logic of evolutionary psychology. It is sometimes supposed that evolutionary psychology is merely a collection of reasonable conjectures and just-so stories. That is not true; it is supported and constrained by evidence from anthropology, behavioral genetics, comparative zoology, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and a host of other fields. The problem is that, at best, and even when there is evidence that fixed biological factors contribute to behavior, all that evidence can show is that an evolutionary explanation is plausible, not that it is either necessary or sufficient.

The major point in favor of evolutionary psychology is that no *more* plausible explanation for human nature appears to be forthcoming. Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and like-minded thinkers may have proffered more profound insights on human social behavior than anyone before or since, but they could not speak to the question of *why* they might be right. Evolution holds out the promise of a rationale. Nor is it a small coincidence that human societies flourish under conditions compatible with the pursuit of selfish goals, just as natural selection seems to demand, but languish under conditions that compel altruism, self-sacrifice, and other kinds of behavior that would be disadvantageous from an evolutionary point of view. Unsurprisingly, some leading social theorists on the Right including Francis Fukuyama, James Q. Wilson, and Charles Murray have embraced evolutionary psychology to at least some degree.

This is not to say that psychology and biology can tell us what kind of society we should have. Eugenics and other dubious social movements that originally gave Darwinism a bad name are justly despised, based as they are on the fallacious assumption that whatever obtains in nature is moral. Some moral precepts, like the idea that every person is equal before the law, obviously transcend the facts of biology. All the same, the science of human nature can inform us about the trade-offs involved in making decisions about the kind of society in which we want to live, and the extent to which our ideals are suited or unsuited to our instincts.

And how are those choices and decisions to be made? Enter morality, consciousness, and free will: elusive quantities whose origins still remain wrapped in substantial mystery and before whose so far unknowable operations even the garrulous and knowing Steven Pinker must in the end fall silent.

* *How the Mind Works* was reviewed by Arthur B. Cody in the March 1998 Commentary.

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