

The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature

Steven Pinker

£25 Allen Lane/ The Penguin Press

Steven Pinker challenges the notion that our experiences are all that shapes us. Has he proved his case, asks Simon Blackburn.

THE blank slate of Steven Pinker's title is the "white paper void of all characters, without any ideas" to which philosopher John Locke compares the original state of the mind, as it passively waits for experience to provide it with the materials of thought and knowledge. Generalised beyond anything Locke intended, the idea would be that the mind is empty of any powers or dispositions at all until life's journey gets under way.

Gottfried Leibniz and David Hume, to mention but two, saw how hopeless this idea was, since at the very least the mind or brain needs the capacity to make something of whatever it is that experience affords us. But according to Pinker's messianic book the idea lives on, often harnessed (inconsistently) with the romantic that the blank mind is inherently noble and that violence, aggression, even a deficient sense of humour or a tin ear, must be the fault of bad parenting, bad environment or other defects of culture or society. Pinker believes that this bad idea infuses a whole cocktail of practical mistakes, including utopian politics, madcap schemes of social engineering, optimistic educational programmes and ludicrous views about gender. To oppose it he mobilises the most modern of sciences, notably neuroscience, genetics, evolutionary theory, and particularly evolutionary psychology.

The Blank Slate is brilliant in several dimensions. It is enjoyable, informative, clear, humane and sensible. Pinker is well aware of the emotions and self-deceptions that swirl around the science of human nature, and he parades a lurid cast of villains from behaviourist B.F. Skinner to psychologist Jerome Kagan. It is difficult to be morally sensitive while treading on people's dreams. But Pinker manages it, while never compromising on the point that good morals and politics need to acknowledge the truth about human beings as they are, rather than how we might like them to be. Its political motto might be the remark E. O. Wilson made about Karl Marx: "Wonderful theory. Wrong species."

All this is very sound. But is the breathless deference to the new sciences of the mind and brain appropriate? Pinker writes rhetorically: "Every student of political science is taught that political ideologies are based on theories of human nature. Why must they be based on theories that are three hundred years out of date?" Yet his chapter on conflict and violence explicitly relies almost entirely on Thomas Hobbes, and his perceptive remarks on human greed and status come from political economists Adam Smith and Thorstein Veblen. Pinker contrasts real science with "armchair" theorising. But most theorising is done in armchairs, and such writers were gifted observers of human nature long before they sat in theirs.

If we read carefully, the contributions of evolutionary theory, psychology or neuroscience appear to be either little or controversial. For example, Pinker says that there is an overwhelming consensus among experts that exposure to media violence does not make children more violent. But I read the book immediately after attending a conference on law and human nature which was told with equal certainty of a consensus among experts on just the opposite. Evidently measuring what the experts think is as hard as measuring anything else. When it comes to evolution and psychology the matter is no different. Pinker is unusually clear about the distinction between underlying evolutionary mechanisms (selfish genes) and proximate psychological mechanisms (overt motivations, such as lust or envy, altruism or malice). But politics and education need to assess the degree of freedom evolution may leave to those mechanisms, as we seek to influence them for the better. If we want to know about that, Hobbes or Leo Tolstoy may still be better guides than the American Psychological Association.

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