

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature**By Steven Pinker****Viking, 509 pages, \$39.99****TOM PASKAL****SPECIAL TO *THE GAZETTE***

While it's true that "local boy makes very good" would be sufficient reason to review any new book by former Montrealer Steven Pinker, this one - *The Blank Slate* - just might make him the single most important figure in all the social sciences. It is already on the New York Times best-seller list and the subject of rabid debate in ivory towers, campuses and coffee shops. That said, this book has a lousy title. The title simply doesn't make sense until you've read the book, but then, you realize that it's a succinct label for what Pinker sees as an erroneous approach.

What Pinker refers to as the blank slate is the popular idea that people start out as blanks, only to be formed by their environments and experiences. Instead, Pinker argues that genetically driven innate tendencies are the strongest forces in determining what kind of people we become. He maintains that over the last couple of decades, much of the scientific community has behaved unscientifically in denying that we are formed by our own innate patterns of thinking and feeling.

Pinker says even though it's obvious that people are born with certain talents and temperaments, the very idea of human nature is often seen as dangerous. "To acknowledge human nature, many think, is to endorse racism, sexism, war, greed, genocide, nihilism, reactionary politics, and neglect of children and the disadvantaged."

This book is partly about new discoveries about human nature, and partly a declaration of war against "the intellectual establishment (that) has forfeited claims to credibility." The big mistake members of the establishment are making, Pinker says, is that they seem unable to prevent themselves from seeing people born as blank slates on which nurture and culture have written their personalities.

"The doctrine that the mind is a blank slate has distorted the study of human beings, and thus the public and private decisions that are guided by that research, many policies on parenting, for example, are inspired by research that finds a correlation between the behaviour of parents and the behaviour of children. Loving parents have confident children, authoritative parents (neither too permissive nor too punitive) have well-behaved children, parents who talk to their children have children with better language skills, and so on.

"Everyone concludes that to grow the best children, parents must be loving, authoritative and talkative, and if children don't turn out well it must be the parents' fault. But the conclusions depend on the belief that children are blank slates. Parents, remember, provide their children with genes, not just a home environment. The correlations between parents and children may be telling us only that the same genes that make adults loving, authoritative and talkative make their children self-confident, well-behaved, and articulate.

"Until the studies are redone with adopted children (who get only their environment, not their genes from their parents), the data are compatible with the possibility that genes make all the difference, the possibility that parenting makes all the difference, or anything in between. Yet in almost every instance, the most extreme position - that parents are everything - is the only one researchers entertain." This is the sixth book by Pinker, the one-time Wagar High School student and Dawson College graduate who has since become a professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT in Cambridge, Mass. His previous books, including *The Language Instinct* and *How the Mind Works*, have been widely acclaimed.

Pinker's impressive reputation, fearlessness and obvious brilliance don't mean that everyone has to agree with him. In fact, there are some interesting alternate approaches to evolutionary psychology. But from now on,

anyone trying to make a point from a blank-slate perspective will have a mountain of evidence to overcome.

This book is a modern magnum opus. The scholarship alone is mind-boggling, a monument of careful research, meticulous citation, breadth of input from diverse fields, great writing and humour. The blank-slate point of view seems like a huge ocean liner sailing in the wrong direction. But Steven Pinker just might succeed in altering its course.

Tom Paskal is a Montreal writer and inventor.