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## BOOK REVIEW

The Crooked Timber of Humanity

THE BLANK SLATE: The Modern Denial of Human Nature. By Steven Pinker, Viking: 510 pp., \$27.95.

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"Philosophy," Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "leaves everything as it is." It was not his wisest remark. Man has always been eager for--and is often alarmed by--new theories about the world: why and how it came to be and where it is going. Philosophers--from Democritus through Plato to Marx and Nietzsche--have rarely left things as they were. Marx, for instance, alleged that previous philosophers had only described the world; his mission was to change it. In fact, earlier philosophers had, in various ways, shaped the world he now proposed to revolutionize.

Would Marx ever have believed that mankind was ripe for radical remodeling if John Locke, two centuries earlier, had not maintained, with liberating plausibility, that men are born with minds like blank slates? Experience alone, Locke insisted, loads them with the information from which they later compose images of reality. A consequence of the blank slate was that there could be no inherited nobility. How could one newborn blank reasonably claim to be innately better than another?

Locke came at the right moment for democracy. His views emboldened America's Founding Fathers when it came to "self-evident" truths. He seemed to promise that everyone began life at the same starting line. Although challenged in detail, his empiricism appeared, for many decades, both common-sensical and scientific. It may still appear the first; it is not the second. Science and common sense seldom tell the same story.

Genetics has now established what Locke's contemporary, Gottfried Leibniz, had immediately suspected: Men's and women's (and animals') minds are elaborately "wired" long before they are born.

And some have capacities that others do not. In their "selfishness," genes do not invest in level playing fields or universal human rights. Justice and fairness may be desirable; they are not natural.

If the theory of the blank slate is no longer tenable, must democratic theory collapse with it? Fortunately, and unarguably, there is no logical connection between how the world is and what values man chooses to impose on it and on himself. The only link between ethics and facts is that "ought entails can": We should not require of ourselves, or others, what it is beyond human capacity to achieve. It is not within our power, for instance, to be identical to our neighbors, neither more intelligent nor more comely; not even if our neighbor is our clone. Absolute equality is contrary to human nature. Why would anyone have to watch his back when saying something so matter-of-fact?

Steven Pinker, best-selling author of "The Language Instinct" and "How the Mind Works," has written a big book, "The Blank Slate," that is built like a bouncer, and it needs to be. "Human nature is human nature" is not the kind of tautology some people are willing to take lying down. For ideological reasons, clever people can still deny that their brains--but not their eventual contents or use--are shaped by their parents' genes. The unreasonable fear is that to concede unwanted truths will leave mankind with no logical resistance to fascism, capitalism, racism, religious obscurantism, male dominance and the rest. If Locke's theory generated democracy, how can rejecting it not rehabilitate tyranny? Part of Pinker's mission is to repeat that there is no inescapable correlation between facts and human value systems, good or bad.

Darwin's theory of natural selection was, in important ways, irrefutably right. Yet its perversion, so-called social Darwinism, did not follow logically from it. Natural selection--which involved what Richard Dawkins called, metaphorically, the "selfish gene"--is not a warrant for genocide nor even for human selfishness (altruism, like love, can be good for the future of you and your genes). Opposition to genocide in no way requires us to deny undeniable evidence for natural selection or for genetically programmed variety.

The use of new knowledge to challenge false theories (which are incompatible with it) is what many of us call intellectual progress. Communism depends on the idea that man is infinitely malleable ("The working classes are to Lenin what minerals are to the metallurgist," said Maxim Gorky, toady-in-chief to the Bolsheviks). If, therefore, it can be shown that men are not pieces of elemental putty ready to be molded by Those Who Know, communism cannot be--as dialectical materialism asserted--an inevitable result of the scheme of things.

Yet despite the Gulag, the Khmer Rouge and Mao Tse-tung's murderous legacy, today's academia remains infatuated with Marxism. Many ranking scientists--Pinker's hit-list is starry with well-known names--refuse to extricate themselves from their implacable mind-sets. "Fascist" is their yelping Pavlovian response to facts that challenge their fantasies. Yet the same men and women deride the Nazis' idiotic denunciation of the theory of relativity as "Jewish

science." Pinker would like to have them recognize that "the problem is not with the possibility that people might differ from each other, which is a factual question that could turn one way or the other. The problem is with the line of reasoning that says that if people do turn out to be different, then discrimination, oppression or genocide would be OK."

The right can be as every bit as mutton-headed as the left. The "religious right," which has corralled President George W. Bush into its pious camp, opposes the use of 5-day-old human embryos in medical research. Why? Because it believes in "ensoulment" at the moment of conception. Belief passes itself off, in modern rhetoric, as an ultra-sincere form of knowledge. In a democracy, aren't we all entitled to our beliefs and our opinions? Of course. And only a crackpot believes that that makes them all equally valid or worthy of respect. The most sincere politician of the last century was Adolf Hitler.

Pinker's retort to the card-carrying pro-lifer is unequivocal and very pro-life: "I see no dignity in letting people die of hepatitis or be ravaged by Parkinson's disease when a cure may lie in research on stem-cells that religious movements seek to ban because it uses balls of cells that have made the 'ontological' leap to 'spiritual souls.' Sources of immense misery ... will be alleviated not by treating thought and emotion as manifestations of an immaterial soul, but by treating them as manifestations of physiology and genetics."

Not exactly catchy prose, I grant, but elsewhere Pinker can be both terse and witty. And when he comes to the point, he knows how to drive it home. He asks what mainstream politician would dare to challenge so-called Judeo-Christian religious theory when 76% of Americans believe (so polls promise) in the biblical account of creation and the same proportion in angels, the devil and other immaterial souls.

The sorry truth is that "most academics, journalists, social analysts and other intellectually engaged people" hide their genuine opinions because they are cowards and careerists. Christianity has, in truth, been a lot less unanimous in its moral stance than official dogma would have us believe. One of the president's men should check out what bishop Julian of Eclanum wrote, in the 5th century, to that coercive centralizer, the great St. Augustine, about that dignitary's lack of common humanity and civilized standards.

Pinker presents an unanswerable case for accepting that man can be, as he is, both wired and free. Genes do not determine how we use our minds, only the kinds of minds we have. No one has to propagate fairy tales in order to justify a better world. Ashley Montagu's UNESCO resolution, stating that biology supports an ethic of "universal brotherhood" is as baseless as Jean Jacques Rousseau's myth of the noble savage. Man is good and bad; man is loving and savage; man is thoughtful and impulsive. The ingredients vary with genetic inheritance. Too bad if that doesn't suit left- or right-wing Utopians, but the good news is that man is unrivaled in ingenuity and in ability to learn and adapt. An individual mind can be closed (or held shut); the book of knowledge, and hence society itself, can never be.

Is the "soul," or what philosopher Gilbert Ryle called "the ghost in the machine," a plausible or a necessary adjunct to our idea of humanity? As for religion, its alleged guarantor, why does a hard head such as Irving Kristol insist that "no community can survive if it is persuaded--or even suspects--that its members are leading meaningless lives in a meaningless universe"? Even if the universe has no "meaning" (whatever that might mean), must it follow that human life is meaningless? The values that civilized men attach to life, and to one another, give it, and us, meaning.

Pinker bites off a lot, and some of it is, to put it mildly, more swallowed than chewed. If he is excellent on genetically modified foods and the fatuous phobias they excite (the president of Zambia would sooner his people starve than eat such foods), he might have spared us his Panglossian assessment of the arts, in which he quotes a ragbag of sources, such as George Bernard Shaw, with callow deference. Nor is he wholly right about the universal aversion to incest: It was a royal privilege in ancient Egypt and widely practiced by Greek tyrants (having come to power, they wanted to keep it in the family).

More important, and much more unwise, he waxes dogmatic about educational curricula. He recommends that the study of "economics, evolutionary biology and probability and statistics" replace that of "the classics or foreign languages" in high schools and colleges. As bridge players say, "Alert!" Americans (and the English) are already fortified in their vanity by ignorance of foreign languages. The despised classics, and the disinterested intelligence which should derive from them, foster nonutilitarian values (which is what some vital values have to be). How many squads of statisticians do we need?

What we certainly need are critics--as Pinker himself is--of reckless conclusions drawn from statistics, or from anything else. Such characters used to be the fruit of what was known as the humanities. And "The Blank Slate"--at once tolerant and polemic, uncompromising and open-minded--offers a notable and instructive contribution to them. As a brightly lighted path between what we would like to believe and what we need to know, it is required reading.

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