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## Book Review

# Pinker takes no prisoners in defense of evolutionary theory

By [Bruce Ramsey](#)

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Why do boys fight? I was taught the modern and scientific answer, that boys fight because they are expected to fight; if society had put them in pink jammies and taught them to be sweet, boys might act like princesses.

Grandma trusted the folk wisdom: "Hokum," she said. "Boys will be boys."

We now know that Grandma was right. In the main, boys will be boys, whether raised by strong fathers, single moms, orphanages or lesbians. Boyness and girlness are largely built-in.

And so are other things, says evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The human mind, he says, is not a blank slate like a memory chip, automatically yielding control to social software. Humans come with a "Pleistocene psyche." We are influenced by the world around us, to be sure. But we are also hard-wired for language and cooperation, for favors, for fighting and for keeping score.

"The Blank Slate" is an attack on what Pinker calls "the secular religion of modern intellectual life," that the human brain is like clay. That was the idea that held the field from Margaret Mead through Stephen Jay Gould, but is now clearly on the defensive.

This book shows why.

It is a feast of a book. Pinker's analytical and impish mind ranges from Charles Darwin to Abigail Van Buren, from scientific studies to Annie Hall. It is less about science than what science implies for our most cherished beliefs.

### **"The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature"**

by Steven **Pinker**  
Viking, \$26.95

For example, Pinker says males have a stronger tolerance for physical risk and a stronger drive for anonymous sex. Women have stronger emotions and are better at reading emotions on the faces of others.

Humans are hard-wired to think in stereotypes and to prefer kin.

Some people, most of them men, are born with criminal tendencies.

And he says, "Biological facts are beginning to box in plausible political philosophies." Communism may work for insects, but humans are programmed for economic exchange and "reciprocal altruism," not for living selflessly for the community.

Pinker carefully attacks both the right and the left — attacking the right, for example, for its belief in an immortal soul that enters the embryo at conception. But in academia, where Pinker fights his battles, the right has no more power than the janitorial staff. The left possesses the territory, and many of them have reacted to Pinker and his fellow evolutionists like a troop of shrieking baboons.

Here he takes them on. It is true, he says, that the general differences between men and women will mean it is silly to expect a 50-50 division of professions. A gender gap does not prove unequal treatment. But inherited tendencies do not justify unequal treatment, either. "People should be treated as individuals," he says, over and over.

He also rebuts the idea that by being hard-wired, human brains must have no free will. A person may resist a tendency for crime, he argues, and a criminal may reasonably be punished.

He also wrestles with the problem of knowledge. That is, if our perceptions are run through a hard-wired brain, how can we trust that our perceptions are real? He says, "Just because our brains are prepared to think in certain ways, it does not follow that the objects of those thoughts are fictitious. Many of our faculties evolved to mesh with real entities in the real world." If our brains made many false moves, we'd be dead.

And so it goes. The reader may think that a "Pleistocene psyche" changes everything we believe about gender, parenting, crime and art, but Pinker argues persuasively that it does not. That war is natural is not an argument for starting one. That pure communism is unnatural does not necessitate pure capitalism.

It will be a rare reader who agrees with everything in this book. But it is an intelligent book that says what it means and thinks about what it is saying. It swoops through evolutionary theory to psychology, linguistics, politics and philosophy, sometimes in wide loops of speculation, sometimes in tight curls of logic.

Though much of the book is about human differences, the bigger idea is inherited similarity — the "psychological unity of our species." It is not a blank slate but a slate with a face — a face that might be called human nature. When Pinker starts describing it, the reader will surely recognize it.

#### **Author appearance**

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Steven Pinker will appear at 4:30 p.m. Saturday on the Richard Hugo stage of the Northwest Bookfest. Pinker will appear with University of Washington professor and author William Calvin. Pinker will also read at 7 p.m. Friday at Seattle's University Book Store (206-634-3400).