

The human stain (Filed: 08/09/2002)

Matt Ridley reviews *The Blank Slate* by Steven Pinker

"A blank sheet of paper has no blotches, and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it, the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it." So said Mao Tse-tung, echoing John Locke, as he "painted" such a beautiful picture on the supposedly blank slate of human nature that it caused the deaths of 65 million of his comrades.

Steven Pinker's book is about a similar, if less bloody, cultural revolution. Like Mao's, it began, reasonably enough, as a revolt against the racial and sexual prejudices that suffused early attempts to understand human nature. But in Pinker's eyes it has turned into something much more dogmatic and closed-minded: a resolute denial throughout much of academia that there is such a thing as human nature.

This denial is as much driven by moral and political motives as by scientific ones: if you admit an evolved and therefore genetic component to human nature, you are supposed to give up hope of changing it.

Pinker argues that social scientists, wedded to the idea of the human mind as a tabula rasa equally capable of learning anything and everything, have talked themselves into an impossible position far beyond anything Locke intended with his simple metaphor of the importance of experience. At its extreme, this takes the form of the deconstructionism of Derrida and the relativism of Foucault.

Fortunately, folk wisdom remains unmoved by this ivory-tower stuff. As Pinker says: "I suspect that few people really believe, deep down, that boys and girls are interchangeable, that all differences in intelligence come from the environment, that parents can micromanage the personalities of their children, that humans are born free of selfish tendencies, or that appealing stories, melodies, and faces are arbitrary social constructions."

Pinker traces the evolution of this dogma and analyses the fears about admitting the existence of human nature that lie behind it: the fear of inequality, the fear of imperfectibility, the fear of determinism, the fear of nihilism.

In every case, the fear is unfounded at best, hypocritical at worst. If we lived in a blank-slate world, where each person was purely the product of his or her upbringing and experience, inequality would be entrenched, perfection even less attainable and determinism complete. It is the very existence of genetic individualities that allows people to rise above the inequalities of their opportunities and the brain-washing of societies.

In recent decades, the devotees of the blank slate theory have created a straw man: the genetic determinist who believes that genes control every aspect of our lives with no reference to the environment. Since this caricature does not exist outside the lunatic fringe, Pinker reveals how "nurturists" have resorted to misreporting and doctoring quotations from those who think genes do at least matter.

Richard Lewontin and Steven Rose, for instance, were co-authors of a dogmatic book called *Not in our genes*, in which they quoted Richard Dawkins as saying "They [the genes] control us, body and mind." In fact, Dawkins wrote "They created us, body and mind."

Pinker knows he will get the same treatment. "Behavioral science", he says, "is not for sissies." He is no sissy: this book is merciless in its exposure of sloppy thinking. Perhaps he is even too strong. It might have been politic to throw his opponents a few lifebelts after sinking their ships. The nature/nurture argument is already too polarised, and too many people, notably in the press, have indeed (wrongly) interpreted the discoveries of "behaviour genes" as implying that there is therefore less room for the environment to influence our actions.

But those who study the actual structure of the mind are generally too busy making fascinating discoveries to respond to the endless attacks of the blank slaters, and they will be grateful for Pinker's magnificent anger.

But to give the impression that this is a mere polemic against Pinker's enemies would be to mislead. This is a very positive book, brimming with a new moral philosophy, and giving great insights into how to understand the

causal forces behind our minds.

In his usual eclectic way, Pinker ranges across the cultural landscape - from scientific journals to cartoons to fiction to Greek philosophy - in search of ideas and analogies. Written with grace and pace, his book is proof that philosophy does not have to be boring. It is an original and vital contribution to science and also a rattling good read.

If I have one criticism, it is that Pinker seems occasionally to imply that we know more than we do about the mind. What we now know is spectacular compared with what we did, but it is still only the smallest of glimpses through the thickest of fogs.

Last month, too late for Pinker's book, scientists studying a cohort of young men born in New Zealand 29 years ago, finally proved a staple claim of social science to be true: that physically abused children are more likely to become antisocial or even criminal. But at the same time they also showed that this applied to only a minority of children - those possessing a less active version of the monoamine oxidase A gene on the X chromosome. To turn antisocial you apparently need both the genetic mutation and the experience of abuse.

Such studies are now coming thick and fast. They pose acute moral dilemmas for politicians. But hiding your head in the sand by denying human nature will only make those dilemmas worse.

Matt Ridley is writing a book about nature and nurture to be published next year.

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