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The blank slate is a theory about the human mind. It is the theory that our minds start out in life as a blank slate, says Mark Ridley

Playing a game of Steven says...

THE BLANK SLATE - The Modern Denial of Human Nature By Steven Pinker Penguin, £25.99; 528pp ISBN 0 7139 9256 5 Buy the book

The blank slate is a theory about the human mind. It is the theory that our minds start out in life as a blank slate, or tabula rasa, or (in the words of John Locke) a piece of white paper. Our minds are formed not (as we should now say) by our genes, but by experience.

The Blank Slate, by Steven Pinker, is partly a criticism of the blank slate theory, and partly a positive argument for an alternative. The problem with the blank slate is that it does not explain what human minds actually do. Take language, for example. Pinker is a Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and an expert on language. Children learn language too fast and too comprehensively for it to be simply the result of experience. Children do not just reproduce what they hear, but create new grammatical sentences — sentences that have syntax and use general rules such as that past participles are formed in -ed. They form new sentences that go beyond anything they have experienced.

Children learn language because they are pre-equipped with language learning abilities. They have more than a blank slate; they have something like a piece of computer programming that is designed specifically to enable them to learn language. Experience — in the form of their parents' talk — is just the input for the program.

So we are not born with a blank slate but with what Pinker calls human nature: a set of preferences, predispositions, and abilities that is common to all humanity. Human nature ultimately comes from our evolutionary past. It is the set of mental abilities that enabled our ancestors to become our ancestors. Our ancestors' contemporaries, who failed to learn language decently, also failed to breed. This view of the human mind has had a number of labels over the years. Evolutionary psychology is the current term. Pinker is one of the great champions, in popular science writing, of evolutionary psychology.

He is not afraid of a row. Maybe only academics get worked up about language, but The Blank Slate has chapters on such "hot buttons" as violence, morality, parenting, Modernist art, and differences between men and women. Here's a sample of his ideas.

Modernist art, according to Pinker, is mistaken because it denies human nature. Its distorted images, ungrammatical and nonsense prose, and atonal music all violate our evolved tastes. That is why most people dislike Modernism.

Humans are programmed with a set of moral responses that can be good guides — such as when sympathy prevents us from killing strangers. But they can also be bad guides; Pinker is suspicious of "yuk factor" responses. We can improve our moral thinking by working out when we are using some evolved response, as opposed to reasoned argument, and whether that evolved response is one we should want to rely on.

Humans go in for crime and violence, on average, when it pays them to do so, not simply because they came from broken families. Indeed, Pinker follows Judith Rich Harris (whose book, The Nurture Assumption, caused a stir a few years ago) and argues that the influence of parenting on children is grossly exaggerated. The main influence parents have on children is the genes they contribute, not their parenting style. After birth, peer groups have more influence on the way children grow up than parents do.

Pinker knows that all these ideas are politically provocative. The Left and Right agree on at least one thing, and that is that evolutionary psychology is evil. We learn that Harris has not only been (predictably) denounced as fascist, but that conservatives have put the boot in too. She has profaned their sacred cow of family values. To

say that something is natural does not mean it is right, nor that it is inevitable, and does not absolve people from responsibility.

Pinker is a fluent writer, superb at explaining difficult ideas for general readers. He keeps his writing alive with humour, stories, cartoons, and one-liners from the movies. I agree with his main position, and admire the way he defends it. However, when I hear particular ideas about particular features of the human mind I often find them unconvincing. I mainly study non-human creatures. You can do experiments with non-humans — you can give female frogs a choice of mates, see which they breed with, and whether particular kinds of mate choice lead to higher reproductive success. Even then, it is hard to show that some mental ability has an evolutionary advantage. Humans interest us more than non-humans, but what we know about human evolutionary psychology is inevitably uncertain.

However, Pinker knows how to keep a sceptic like me diverted. Even in the bits I found less convincing I had a regular laugh at his well-timed jokes. The chapter on sex differences has some good stories about the Darwin Awards, given annually to “the individuals who ensure the long-term survival of our species” by dying “in a sublimely idiotic fashion”. The winners are almost always men, not women. One honoree “squashed himself under a Coke machine after tipping it forward to get a free can”. And then there was the violent conference on violence. The blank-slate ideologists took a dislike to some proposed conference and called out the troops. “When the conference was held three years later, protesters invaded the hall and, as if to provide material for comedians, began a shoving match with the participants.” I was also pleased to learn the joke about the young man who told his mother he was studying to become a Doctor of Philosophy. She replied — “Wonderful! But what kind of disease is philosophy?”

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