

Author challenges "Blank Slate" theory of human nature

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Playwright Anton Chekhov wrote, "Man will become better when you show him what he is like."

That's the central idea behind a new book written by MIT psychology professor and Pulitzer Prize finalist Steven Pinker.

In "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature," Pinker explores the prevailing theories about human nature and new sciences that are forcing us to re-examine old ideas about what makes humans human.

"This book is about the moral, emotional and political colorings of the concept of human nature in modern life," he writes in the preface.

Pinker will appear Monday at the Carnegie Music Hall as part of the Drue Heinz Lecture Series to discuss the book that critics have called "controversial and commanding."

Pinker says the book represents "two very intense years" of research and writing that is meant to bridge the gap between what scholars say publicly about human nature and what they actually believe.

For example, Pinker says anyone who has raised more than one child knows that each is born with unique talents and temperaments, just as anyone who has been in a heterosexual relationship knows that men and women have very different emotional experiences.

Thus, the Blank Slate ÷ the idea that people are born without any innate characteristics or differences ÷ cannot be true.

To the contrary, Pinker believes recent scientific studies of the mind, brain, genes and evolution have shown that everyone is born with something written on his slate ÷ superior language or math skills, a more gentle or violent nature ÷ but that those features also are influenced by genetics and cultural experiences.

"How we view human nature is important," Pinker says. "It affects every aspect of our lives, from the way we raise our children to the political movements we embrace.

Pinker writes that many experts and politicians are hostile to new theories about human nature.

"To acknowledge human nature, many think, is to endorse racism, sexism, war, greed, genocide, nihilism, reactionary politics and neglect of children and the disadvantaged," he says.

The goal is to help people separate moral beliefs and values from scientific fact. For example, Pinker says religious beliefs about the precise moment when life begins have hindered scientific research for treatment of Parkinson's disease and paralysis.

"Human nature and morality are not the same thing, but they tend to be connected in people's minds," he says.

Pinker says it was not his intention in publishing the book to upset people. Instead, he wants to bring forth new discoveries about human nature that have been ignored or suppressed for various political or religious reasons.

"I'm simply arguing that these ideas need to be re-examined, because they can lead us to a new understanding and enhanced view of ourselves."

Although the book will largely appeal to academic and scholarly types, Pinker says readers don't need a psychology degree to understand the arguments.

"I think there are universal themes in the book about parenting, violence and politics," he says.

Ultimately, Pinker says he hopes people will embrace new ideas about human nature so that the values about life we hold precious will not only survive but be enhanced.

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