

## POINT 'BLANK'

Steven Pinker shoots from the hip, asking – and answering – the tough questions behind the nature vs. nurture debate

Reviewed by Nancy Jeannette Friedlander

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This book may infuriate you. Or it may make you shout, "Thank heavens – at last!" In this provocative work about human nature, Steven Pinker launches himself headfirst into one of the most controversial, taboo-ridden debates of our time – and takes the less popular side.

The issue ultimately comes down to nature vs. nurture in humans: whether our minds are "blank slates" to be written on solely by culture and upbringing, or whether biology also plays an important role in what it means to be human.

Pinker, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has written extensively on language and cognition, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1998 for his book "How the Mind Works." In this new book, while managing also to be colorful, lively and entertaining, he constructs a tightly reasoned and thoroughly documented

argument that we are not blank slates at birth, that both biology and culture play important roles in who we are and how we behave, and that there is indeed such a thing as innate human nature. He does not hesitate to dive into even more turbulent waters, discussing controversies about whether innate characteristics may underlie certain differences between groups. (He is meticulous about discussing individual variation, statistical probability and exceptional circumstances.)

Whether or not one ends up agreeing with Pinker, "The Blank Slate" deserves to be read carefully and with an open mind, especially by those who would forbid certain kinds of research, or believe that it is immoral (or sexist or fascist or racist or just plain evil) even to ask certain kinds of questions.

In discussing the two extreme positions – that culture is everything,

or that biology is everything – Pinker's expressed goal "is not to argue that genes are everything and culture is nothing – no one believes that – but to explore why the extreme position (that culture is everything) is so often seen as moderate, and the moderate position [involving both biology and culture] is seen as extreme."

The Blank Slate doctrine that culture is everything is not only politically correct, but also appeals to popular ideals and beliefs: If humans are blank slates at birth, then we can be whatever we want to be; all it takes is hard work and belief in oneself. We find ourselves inspired by people who overcome severe odds and discouragement to achieve treasured goals, and we use such stories to motivate our children. Similarly, if someone turns out badly, it is generally believed to result from factors such as poverty or mistreatment during childhood. Such arguments frequently underlie courtroom defense tactics.

What has happened to bring this about? Why does a biological understanding of human nature seem so threatening, so dangerous? If it is really dangerous, how can we defuse that danger? And if it is not dangerous, how can we change people's perspectives? What is the latest research relevant to the question of nature vs. nurture? And how can this be applied to some of the "hot buttons" of our time?

Pinker deals with all this and much more. He follows a logical progression, laying groundwork and building on what has come before. The titles of the major sections are informative, and reveal both the color and humor that accompany the details and logical reasoning.

In Part I, "The Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine," Pinker provides extensive background from a wide variety of perspectives, including philosophy (the metaphor of a "blank slate" is commonly attributed to John Locke), anthropology, linguistics, cognitive science (including a description of the influence of the Department of Cognitive Science at UCSD), neuroscience, behavioral genetics and evolutionary psychology, to name only a few.

Part II, "Fear and Loathing," describes some of the horror stories that have befallen researchers espousing views on the wrong side of the politically correct research fence. Pinker presents detailed analyses of two of the worst: 1) The denunciations and protests that followed E.O. Wilson's publication of "Sociobiology" in 1975; criticism covered a wide range, but Wilson's main heresy was the concept that biologically evolved needs and drives could play an important role in human social behavior. And 2), the recent

vilification of research conducted by anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and geneticist James Neel among the Yanomamo – in this case, the accusations involved such alleged behaviors as fabricating data, causing violence among the Yanomamo and deliberately infecting the Yanomamo with potentially fatal disease and withholding medical treatment in order to test genetic theories.

In both cases, accusations ranged far afield, even involving attacks on the researchers' alleged personal and political motivations. For both of these controversies, Pinker expresses strong and clear support for the researchers, and denounces the extreme claims and tactics that were used against them.

In Part III, "Human Nature With a Human Face," Pinker explores why so many people find a biological component of human nature to be a dangerous idea. What are we afraid of? The four chapters in this section explore four fears: the fear of inequality, of imperfectibility, of determinism and of nihilism. For example, the author notes that "fear of the terrible consequences that might arise from a discovery of innate differences has ... led many intellectuals to insist that such differences do not exist ..." but he says other approaches are possible: "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 after all." He then demonstrates why he believes that reasoning is flawed.

Part IV, "Know Thyself," investigates human nature still more deeply: what it seems to be, and how and why it may have developed that way. Pinker's evolution-based discussions explore intriguing topics such as kinship, sexuality and love, morality, conflict and gamesmanship.

He engages the reader in dialogues that heighten interest while emphasizing the point at hand. For example, consider this stunning question regarding parenthood, from a chapter entitled "The Many Roots of Our Suffering:" "Moral philosophers play with a hypothetical dilemma in which people can run through the left door of a burning building to save some number of children or through the right door to save their own child. If you are a parent, ponder this question: Is there any number of children that would lead you to pick the left door?"

Part V, "Hot Buttons," examines five controversial topics in light of what has been previously discussed: politics, violence, gender, children and the arts. Each is explored in depth in its own chapter, and Pinker presents detailed and fascinating analyses of these thorny issues.

In the concluding section, Part VI, "The Voice of the Species,"

Pinker uses five works of literature to reprise five main themes of the book. This chapter includes often lengthy excerpts from Emily Dickinson, Kurt Vonnegut, George Orwell, Mark Twain and Isaac Bashevis Singer. All are enlightening and thought-provoking.

I was struck most strongly by the excerpt from George Orwell's "1984," which Pinker uses to illustrate a theme that he has frequently discussed: that the true danger is not if there is an innate (i.e., biological) human nature, but if there is not one. At the end of the excerpt, the agent of the omnipresent totalitarian government says to the hero, "We control life ... at all its levels. You are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable."

How about that for reversing the reasoning underlying the political correctness of the Blank Slate doctrine? The mind is forced to contemplate a 180-degree turn, to consider the possibility that while there may be dangers inherent in the existence of innate biological differences among humans, there may be far more dangers if there is no innate human nature, which would mean that humans can be trained from birth to accept fully whatever beliefs and behaviors a controlling social force may wish upon them.

This landmark book makes an important contribution to the argument about nature vs. nurture in humans. Whether or not most readers end up on Pinker's side of the fence, one can hope that his thoroughness and reasoning will shed light into the darker corners where research has been suppressed by taboos, and where freedom of thought and speech have been inhibited by fear of consequences for asking forbidden questions.

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Excerpts from The Blank Slate

Behavioral science is not for sissies. Researchers may wake up to discover that they are despised public figures because of some area they have chosen to explore or some datum they have stumbled upon. Findings on certain topics – daycare, sexual behavior, childhood memories, the treatment of substance abuse – may bring on vilification, harassment, intervention by politicians, and physical assault. Even a topic as innocuous as left-handedness turns out to be booby-trapped. In 1991 the psychologists Stanley Coren and Diane Halpern published statistics in a medical journal showing that lefties on average had more prenatal and perinatal complications, are victims of more accidents, and die younger than righties. They were soon showered with abuse – including the

threat of a lawsuit, numerous death threats, and a ban on the topic in a scholarly journal – from enraged left-handers and their advocates.

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