

BOOK REVIEWS

Steven Pinker (2002) *The blank slate* (Penguin Putnam).

Reviewed by Max Hocutt

This pleasantly written, well documented and witty book by the celebrated psycho-linguist and author of *How the mind works*, *The language instinct*, and other best selling works brings an impressive array of learning — about cognitive psychology, brain physiology, evolutionary biology, technical philosophy, anthropology, and popular culture — to bear on some hotly disputed issues of morality and politics. There are authors who know as much about each of these topics, but there can be few who know as much about all of them or who could make as good use of them as Pinker does here. Nothing in the book is new, but it is all adroitly deployed. Specialists won't learn anything about their own fields, but *The blank slate* was not written for them. Readers interested in the findings and political implications of modern psychology will find the book informed, intelligent, and fun to read. The reaction of those whose oxen are being gored will be less favorable.

The thesis of Pinker's book is that, despite desperate denials by the political left and irredentist opposition by the religious right, there is a genetically determined, because evolutionarily selected, human nature that is hard wired in the brain and that we must seek to understand if we want to treat each other better, devise more intelligent public policy, and live more happily together. In Pinker's view, human nature doesn't explain everything, but it does explain some things. So, we ignore it at our peril. Let me say at the outset that Pinker seems to me to make a good case for this thesis, which has been urged most famously in recent years by the sociobiologists E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and their followers.

In the course of making his case, Pinker debunks three influential ideas — the Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine. Invented by armchair psychologists at the beginning of the scientific era, these three ideas now form the bedrock of opposition to belief in a biologically based human nature. This opposition has gone so far that some literary theorists have recently described human nature as a “social construction”, meaning that they think it was made up out of whole cloth to perpetuate inequalities of race, class, and gender. Pinker wants to combat this pernicious nonsense by showing that

human nature is real and rooted in biology. His attempt to do so will win him no friends among those who judge scientific findings by their moral and political implications rather than the other way around, but his cause is an honorable one, and he has done us a service by undertaking it.

The three main objects of Pinker's animus are introduced in Chapter 1 under the heading, "The Official Theory". Pinker had already warned us in the Preface that adherents to this theory sometimes display "the mentality of a cult, in which fantastical beliefs are flaunted as proof of one's piety" and that this has "not just put blinkers on researchers but turned any discussion of [human nature] into a heresy that must be stamped out." (x). Later Pinker will show how these same people poison the wells of inquiry by systematically misrepresenting their opponents. Anybody brave enough to suggest the modest thesis that genes might explain something is automatically treated as having embraced the absurdity that genes explain everything, which leaves standing only the assumption, usually not stated or defended, that genes explain nothing.¹ Yet this last proposition contradicts the increasingly evident fact that behavior is controlled by the brain, the formation of which is influenced by the genes, the selection of which was due to a Darwinian nature.

I hope that this way of putting his position does not suggest that Pinker comes down entirely on the nature side of the nature/nurture debate. Pinker understands that how people turn out is the result of a complex interaction between nature and nurture. What he wants to do here is restore the balance by showing how a politically motivated emphasis on nurture has caused some people to overlook the reality, increasingly confirmed by modern science, of human nature. He also wants us to recognize that the reality of human nature puts some constraints on how we should treat each other.²

Pinker's critique of the Official Theory, which "set the agenda" for behavioral science in the first half of the 20th century, begins with John Locke's Blank Slate empiricism. (6) As Pinker views them, J. B. Watson, B. F. Skinner and their followers assumed that the mind is a blank slate when they undertook to explain its workings using only a few simple mechanisms of learning. Likewise, Franz Boaz, Emile Durkhem and such of their acolytes as Margaret Mead made the same assumption when they declared the characters and dispositions of individual persons to be products of their diverse cultures and disparate social groupings; never mind what people of different societies might have in common as members of the same biological species. It was thought to be in their favor that these nurturist paradigms fostered "progressive" political causes by encouraging belief that all evils could be cured and human character given any

shape we might wish to impose on it by designing better social institutions.

There is a great deal of truth to this story. Preoccupied with describing behavior, rat psychologists and social science positivists did neglect to exploit Darwin's astute observation that knowledge of natural selection can help us understand the conduct of human beings. They also failed to grasp the significance of cultural universals — patterns of behavior (e.g., male dominance, abhorrence of incest, striving for status) that, being resident in every society, are almost certainly rooted in the genes. Messianic zeal for the reform of society, fear of being regarded as a proponent of eugenics with sympathies for Nazism, and unlimited optimism about our ability to shape behavior by controlling the environment contributed to this tunnel vision. The fact can hardly be denied.

Nevertheless, I believe that Pinker's story is a little too simple to be entirely accurate. Viewed more generously, the behaviorists were trying to substitute for unverifiable introspection a more reliable source of data, and their counterparts in the social sciences were trying to get away from belief that everything can be explained by principles of pure reason known *a priori*; they just went too far in the opposite direction. Fairness requires noting, too, that in the book that gave behaviorism its name, J.B. Watson made clear his belief that scientific study of the very real human body offers greater promise for understanding than unscientific palaver about an unreal human soul. It must also be said, that there was no direct way to investigate either the brain or genes until the last quarter of the 20th century, when Skinner, who did not want speculation to substitute for evidence, was very old and Watson, Boas, and Durkheim were all dead. In short, the behavioral scientists did what they could in the circumstances.

Pinker's emphasis on the blank slate may be simplistic in another way as well. More plausible causes of belief that human behavior lacks an intelligible connection to brains and genes are the *other* two doctrines in his trio. All three are wrong, of course, but the Slate was a response to legitimate epistemological considerations, while the Savage and the Ghost originated in irrelevant prejudices. We owe the Noble Savage to the active imagination of Jean Jacques Rousseau, a literary man who, undeterred by the complete lack of evidence for his ludicrous fantasies, declared the natural human striving for status to be the result of corruption by the artificial institution of property. Although it was given its modern form by the physicist Descartes, the equally baseless doctrine of the Ghost in the Machine ultimately derives from a scientifically uncritical Christianity, which teaches that, since human beings are immaterial souls temporarily housed in alien bodies, they have free will, a miraculous capacity to make choices uninfluenced by bodily based desires. The cultist attitude to which

Pinker refers derives from these unscientific origins.

The story has one more complication: Pinker's unholy trinity do not always go together. Locke, the inventor of the blank slate, held that there is such a thing as human nature, although he made no effort to connect it to biology. Rousseau's account of the Noble Savage is an attempt — however wrong — to delineate human nature, which Rousseau believed had been corrupted by society. Descartes was so far from subscribing to Locke's Blank Slate as to believe that absolutely all ideas are innate — built into the mind from the get go. And, as Pinker makes a point of noting, Noam Chomsky, a darling of the radical left, endorsed Descartes's nativism when he (Chomsky) advanced the hypothesis that a distinctively human capacity for language is hardwired in the brains of all human beings everywhere.

Despite these complications and anomalies, I think it must be acknowledged that Pinker's account of the Official Theory is substantially correct. It is a caricature, but caricatures bring out their subjects' salient features.

Pinker's positive case for a biologically based human nature begins in Chapter 3, "The Last Wall to Fall", with a list of late 20th century developments in cognitive psychology (the computational theory of the mind), neuroscience (the cognitive and emotional effects of brain lesions), behavioral genetics (twin studies), and evolutionary psychology (the study of the "phylogenetic structure and adaptive functions of the brain"). Each of these provides what Pinker calls a bridge from biology to culture, meaning that it shows how culture results from attempts by human beings to serve their biologically based needs; not the other way around.

As Pinker is aware, this proposition is consistent with saying that culture creates higher level needs and channels individual expressions of biology in particular directions. Pinker might have made this fact clearer and allayed misunderstanding about the degree of his commitment to nativism if he had explained more fully than he does that genes determine not specific results but a range of outcomes, leaving it to the environment to select the one that will become manifest.³ He knows this, I am sure, but many of his readers will not. The topic of culture is continued in Chapter 4, "Culture Vultures", where it is demonstrated that evidence for the innateness of the distinctively human facility for language, a complex instrument for elaborate communication with others, also supports Aristotle's belief that human beings are communal animals, a truism that had been explicitly denied by Rousseau, who had said in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* that human beings were originally solitary creatures who lacked language.

The computational theory of the mind is taken up in Chapter 5, “The Slate’s Last Stand”. There Pinker distinguishes East Coast from West Coast computationalism and says that, while the folk at MIT think of the brain as composed of distinct modules with specific purposes, those in La Jolla favor the hypothesis that it is a general purpose network. Pinker, who works at MIT, describes the West Coast view as the slate’s last stand, but I think that this is misleading. As Pinker admits, both East and West acknowledge that the brain has innate structure, and both know that different parts of the brain are dedicated to different functions. As I understand it, the disagreement between them is about a particular part of the brain, viz., the cerebral cortex. The engineers and philosophers at MIT tend to regard it as a Turing machine having a previously fixed program with a determinate range of outcomes for each specific input, which seems to leave no place for learning and overlooks the fact that the cortex is layered. By contrast, their counterparts at La Jolla prefer to think of the cortex at birth as a system of antecedently given connection weights between layers that is subsequently modified by a pre-wired feedback loop that enables learning. There is also dispute about whether it is useful to think of the brain’s operations as computations on representations; the East says Yea, the West Nay. Decidedly an amateur here, I may have this all wrong; but I doubt that we have heard the last of this debate, and the outcome is not by any means certain.

In Chapter 6, which is wittily titled “Political Scientists”, we are instructively treated to brief analyses of the outraged and intemperate reactions of Stephen J. Gould, Richard Lewontin and other left leaning scientists to such now infamous works as E. O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology* and Herrnstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*. Both books caused a stir by suggesting that there might be genetic bases for behavioral differences, including differences in IQ and personality. Willing to admit that genes influence bodily conformation and pigmentation, Lewontin and Gould balked at the idea that heredity makes a difference to intelligence and temperament. Yet, it is perhaps relevant to note, the suggestion would have gone unnoticed if it had been made about other animals than human beings. Everybody knows that different breeds of dogs differ in intelligence and temperament, as do different species of monkeys. Human beings were presumed to be an exception.

It is easy to see why this presumption should have been the opinion of those who believed in the Ghost, harder to understand how it could have become an article of faith for hard nosed biologists knowledgeable about both genes and natural selection. Pinker’s solution to the puzzle is to observe that thinkers such as Lewontin and Gould have sacrificed their science to their politics, which they

regard as more important. A colleague of mine better informed than I am about such matters tells me that the two have admitted as much, without making apologies for it, but I do not have a reference at hand. As Pinker notes in Chapter 7, “The Holy Trinity”, a similar attitude is on display in the religious right’s opposition to evolutionary theory and materialistic psychology, both of which have been condemned on the ground that they undermine traditional morality.⁴ Pinker believes that both sides of this political divide have put the cart before the horse.

Pinker’s next four chapters attempt to allay some of the fears that have given rise to the antinomian attitude just discussed. (His table of contents groups these chapters under the heading “Human Nature with a Human Face” while grouping the previous two under the title “Fear and Loathing”, which seems to be a reversal of what was originally intended. Proofreaders, where are you when you are needed?) In Chapter 8, “The Fear of Inequality”, we are cautioned against confusing the proposition that *individual* differences are heritable with the proposition that *group* differences have hereditary explanations. Except when discussing differences between the sexes, Pinker accepts the proposition that differences in IQ and temperament are at least partly heritable within groups but rejects the proposition that they are heritable between groups. Here Pinker might have done well to use his remarkable power of illuminating difficult topics to say something enlightening about the elusive concept of heritability, but it is already a long book and his interests lie elsewhere. His concern throughout is not how people differ but how they are alike. Anxious to emphasize that we all share a common nature because we share a common biology, he assures us that nothing discovered by science could possibly justify denying any person basic rights. However, he is silent on the difficult question of when and where differences should be taken into account. Should you not discriminate by sex when choosing a mate or a teammate? Or by IQ when admitting people to college? It is wicked and un-American to discriminate on irrelevant grounds — e.g., race or gender instead of qualification for the job — but to ignore differences when they provably make a difference is ill advised if not irrational

More satisfactory than his treatment of these issues is Pinker’s discussion of three remaining fears. In Chapter 9, “The Fear of Imperfectibility”, he argues that embracing the Blank Slate to preserve a utopian vision of human perfectibility not only commits the fallacy of inferring *is* from *ought* but has also been “a major cause of twentieth century nightmares”. (170) This is a valid reversal of the usual argument — that you commit the naturalistic fallacy and encourage

atrocities if you are so foolish as to accept the common sense belief that facts about human nature should influence deliberations about what ought to be done. A fuller discussion of this issue might have pointed out the difference between (1) thinking that you can deduce what people ought to do from a human nature supposedly known a priori, by pure reason and (2) recognizing that, since genes put limits on an organism's malleability, the fact has to be taken into account when devising policy.

Chapter 10, "The Fear of Determinism" reminds us that *explanation* does not constitute *exculpation*. Why not? Because the aim of punishment should be deterrence, which requires holding people to account for breaking the rules. Captious philosophers will deplore the way in which Pinker blithely disposes of objections to this theory, but he is right to ignore them. The chapter also points out that denying the reality of a metaphysical free will is not denying that people make choices. Doing what you want to do because you want to do it is exercising your freedom of choice; and this platitude is not made less true by the fact that the deliberations which preceded and caused the choice took place in your brain. These observations have long been commonplace in philosophy, but Pinker's use of them should help reduce confusion in the minds of the general public.

So should Chapter 11 "The Fear of Nihilism", the last in Pinker's list of bogeymen. An atheist as well as a materialist, Pinker points out here that loss of faith in God does not automatically entail a breakdown of morality. The point is, of course, not original with Pinker, but it bears repeating. Citing the zoologist Richard Dawkins, Pinker also reminds us here that there is a genetic basis for limited altruism. The philosopher David Hume had ventured this last hypothesis over two centuries ago, but it is good to have it confirmed by evidence from modern biology.

Because the second half of *The blank slate* deals with such a diverse variety of issues, any attempt to summarize it would soon degenerate into a list of the topics covered. Prominent among these topics are Christina Sommers on gender feminism, literary theorists on social constructivism, philosophers of mind on the mysterious elusiveness of consciousness, J.Q. Wilson on the innateness of a sense of justice, Thomas Sowell on the distinction between a tragic and a utopian vision of human nature, and Judith Harris on the surprisingly negligible influence of family life on adult character. At the end, there is even a chapter on the arts. Pinker's discussions of these topics are always interesting and provocative. They also bear directly on the main theme, which is the importance of biology to an understanding of human nature and the importance of understanding human nature to setting intelligent social policy. Since,

I cannot hope in a short space to say anything interesting about all of these issues, I shall try to give you an idea of their general tenor by saying a few words about just one of them — the genetic basis of male violence.

Chapter 17, “Violence”, provides evidence that war and other forms of aggression are not antithetical to but expressions of human (specifically, male) nature, regrettable though the fact may be. I fear that there is ample evidence for this proposition, which fits better with Sowell’s tragic vision than with the utopian vision of such as Rousseau. In this same chapter, Pinker tells us how he was disabused of his youthful commitment to Bakunin’s anarchism and converted to his parents’ more pessimistic assessment of human beings when a police strike in his native Montreal was followed by wholesale looting, burning, and other forms of pillage. “This decisive empirical test left my politics in tatters (and offered a foretaste of life as a scientist)” (p.331). In Chapter 18 Pinker explains that, although the tendency of men to engage in rape clearly has genetic causes, reporting the fact is not apologizing for rape. Rather, the point is to remind us why every society needs to punish rape, dislike of which has an even firmer genetic basis. All true, I think.

Pinker’s book ends with a brief epilogue, “The Voice of the Species”. Here he concedes that the Official Theory might once have served worthy causes but concludes that to hang on to it in the face of recent advances in science “is to make intellectual life increasingly irrelevant to human affairs, to turn intellectuals into hypocrites, and to turn everyone else into anti-intellectuals” (p.422). I think that the concession is dubious, but the conclusion is correct and called for.

In addition to a 7-page preface and a text of 435 pages, all very readable, *The blank slate* contains a 5 page list of human universals, 20 pages of end notes, a 28 page small print bibliography, and an 18 page index. Like Pinker’s earlier books, it will be a best seller; but like other books on the topic of human nature it will also be a subject of heated controversy.

Notes

1. Since I have myself been a victim of this tactic, I can testify to the truth of Pinker’s observation.
2. Pinker will, of course, be charged with making the converse mistake, forgetting the importance of nurture. In fact, that is the line that Simon Blackburn takes in *The New Republic*, Nov. 19, 2002. I think it is a misreading.

3. Thus, E. O. Wilson says that genes determine epigenetic (i.e., second order) rules, not specific outcomes.
4. An example of this response is Anthony Daniels's review of *The blank slate* in the November 11, 2002 issue of National Review, Vol. LIV, No., 21, pp. 48–53.

About the reviewer

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Craig DeLancey (2001) *Passionate engines: what emotions reveal about mind and artificial intelligence* (Oxford University Press).

Reviewed by Jennifer Radden

DeLancey's book is nothing if not thorough, as he carefully lays the ground for the positive part of his thesis about the affect program theory by reviewing and evaluating most of the major theories and ideas about the emotions debated by philosophers during the last thirty or forty years. He considers and critiques "cognitivism" in its various strains, including the view that emotions reduce to, and the view that they are required for, beliefs or other propositional attitudes. He explores what he finds the most resistant alternative to a naturalist theory of emotion; this is the kind of Interpretationism associated with Daniel Dennett and Donald Davidson, among others, by which our talk of mental states is a tool for interpreting, understanding and predicting the behavior of ourselves and others using a belief-desire rubric. He explains and dismantles the claims made about emotions as socially constructed. He reviews and explores the debate about emoting for fictions (why do we cry at the movies?), which has absorbed both philosophers of mind and aestheticians for many years. Several other topics in theories of emotion, such as the intentionality, rationality and internalism of emotions are subject to the same exhaustive analysis. The writing here is clear, the inferences and conclusions are sensible, and the whole serves to remind us what a hodge-podge of ill-grounded theories and exaggerated claims has dominated philosophical thinking about the emotions for a very long time.

Nothing that comes later can detract from the worth of DeLancey's comprehensive, and measured analysis of this bouquet of theories about the emotions. Whatever its demerits, and it has some, *Passionate Engines* provides a valuable review and discussion of the weaknesses of the several most common unrealistic theories and hypotheses held within philosophy.