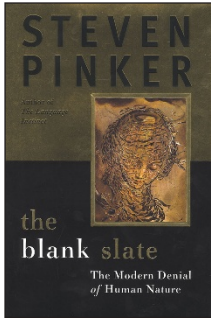


Tales of a Hobbesian Cynic



The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature

by Steven Pinker

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Reviewed by Josef P Rauschecker

On the back cover, nine scholars call this book provocative and brilliant. I could not agree more with the first term, but I thoroughly disagree with the second. Compared with previous books by this prolific writer, this one falls far short of expectations. The book is written with a highly opinionated mind, not a dispassionate-scientific one. Pinker's arguments lack rigor and objectivity, and the book often degenerates into a political treatise.

Neuroscientists will not take the book seriously because it presents only a few selective and misleading facts about the brain. I think geneticists will feel the same way. But a scientifically objective book is perhaps not what Pinker intended. He takes aim at a theory of the human mind as a *tabula rasa* ('blank slate') shaped by the environment, replacing it instead with "a complex system of innate structures." Pinker draws from what he calls the "new sciences of human nature": evolutionary psychology, behavioral genetics and select areas of cognitive neuroscience. He claims the book is all about "human nature," but it is finally more about politics, doctrines and his personal beliefs.

Pinker throws a great number of '-isms' together, from empiricism and dualism to behaviorism, connectionism and communism. All these theories are equally bad and have faltered, he argues, because they failed to acknowledge human nature. Pinker takes on many prominent figures, notably the late Stephen Jay Gould and Pinker's own mentor Noam Chomsky. Pinker calls Chomsky a "utopian," presumably because he is too fond of Humboldt, Marx and Rousseau. Pinker says that "evolution has endowed us with a moral sense." Statements like these convey a strong sense of ersatz religion, and the arguments to prove them are difficult to conceive.

The book drips with sarcasm against contrarian views. His aggressive writing style is off-putting, and one is constantly in suspense about who is next on his hit list. Besides "blank slaters," he takes aim at environmentalists, feminists and liberals. The book could have been a worthwhile exercise in ushering people into modern-day neuroscience. Unfortunately, Pinker's knowledge about the brain is too limited for

that. He talks of the fears nonscientists harbor that "Philistines in white coats" will one day take over the humanities, arts and social sciences. Ironically, this book—because of its powerful language and overbearing eloquence—may stir up precisely such fears.

I do not know a single neuroscientist who would support the notion of "limitless shaping of the brain by the environment", as Pinker insinuates some do. Ever since the 1960s, it has been clear that the brain is not a *tabula rasa* but is nevertheless highly plastic during early development. Still, Pinker declares triumphantly, and without presenting much evidence, that these ideas have been refuted.

Pinker tackles a number of controversial issues in some detail. He admits that his "sciences of human nature" resonate most closely with the assumptions of the political right. Darwin was directly influenced by the economist Adam Smith, who in turn derived his theories from Machiavelli and Hobbes. Hobbes sees humans as inherently limited in knowledge, wisdom and virtue, which precludes a solution to social problems like poverty and crime. Pinker confesses that in his own view, the "sciences of human nature" vindicate this Hobbesian cynicism.

He also tries to address why America is more violent than other industrialized Western nations. Although he concedes a culture of "combative masculinity," his primary theory is that children, particularly boys, are naturally aggressive but gradually unlearn aggression. But why and how that occurs, he does not say. Although Pinker is politically correct throughout the book—he uses the female pronoun when gender is ambiguous—his opinions on gender roles turn out to be fairly conventional.

While the above section is by far the weakest part of the book, Pinker's views on the arts are perhaps the most shocking. He lists a "drive for status," the urge to impress other people, as the main reason for the evolution of arts. What a cynical theory for one of the greatest pleasures of mankind, and what a curse to seek an adaptive value in everything! But it gets worse. According to Pinker, modern art—such as paintings by Gauguin and Picasso—applies "freakish distortions of shape and color" and the "militant denial of human nature" in the twentieth century, leading directly to "ugly, baffling and insulting art". If this is not reminiscent of the infamous crusade against "degenerate art", then I do not know what is.

In his epilogue, Pinker launches the ultimate attack on the Blank Slate and calls it "anti-life, anti-human." This sounds like bigotry from someone who ridicules Catholic opponents of abortion, condones the death penalty and has no qualms about human cloning because clones "are just identical twins born at different times." One of the things I find most irritating about the book is its extreme lack of tolerance and compassion. Pinker pays lip service to the protection of minorities, but does not explain how the powerful forces of human nature can be tamed. If our morals are grounded in human nature and acting against human nature is bad (see above), how can we ever rise above it? The end result will inevitably be social Darwinism, whether we like it or not: "Noble guys tend to finish last." Pinker's conclusion that this is not "a reactionary doctrine that dooms us to eternal oppression, violence and greed" is inconsistent with the tenor of the rest of the book. What remains is an unpalatable treatise in intellectual arrogance, which does the cause of biology of the human mind a disservice.

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