

Biology**All in Our Heads****'The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature' by Steven Pinker***Reviewed by Colin McGinn*

Sunday, October 13, 2002; Page BW03

THE BLANK SLATE**The Modern Denial Of Human Nature**

By Steven Pinker

Viking. 509 pp. \$27.95

According to the blank slate theory of human nature, we don't have any. We are entirely the product of environmental influences, with no original endowment. All the genes do is manufacture empty mental sheets, which then receive imprints from outside. This doctrine is often taken to support progressive egalitarian social values, for if we are all initially equally blank, there can be no grounds in our human nature for such inequalities as racism, sexism and economic disparities. All we need is the right social engineering, and we shall achieve universal parity.

By contrast, theories that claim substantial genetic differences among people are often thought to support discrimination of one kind or another. Thus what seems to be a scientific question becomes charged with political meaning.

Steven Pinker, a professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at MIT, is all against the blank slate as a piece of science. Assembling a wealth of empirical research, he argues that a great many aspects of the human mind are owed to heredity: "This book is based on the estimation that whatever the exact picture turns out to be, a universal complex human nature will be part of it. I think we can say with some confidence that the mind is equipped with a battery of emotions, drives, and faculties of reasoning and communicating, and that they have a common logic across cultures, are difficult to erase or redesign from scratch, were shaped by natural selection acting over the course of human evolution, and owe their basic design (and some of their variation) to information in the genome."

There are two parts to this thesis. First, the main general characteristics of our species are genetically programmed: our facility with language, our ability to understand each other's actions as manifestations of mind, our number sense, our moral sense, our tool-making propensities. The environment contributes to the flowering of these innate abilities, but it works upon material already highly structured and specialized. Second, entrenched differences among people can also be innately based: Some people are born more intelligent than others, personality types are stamped into the genes, and the differences between the sexes are largely genetically fixed. Our minds are no more uniformly blank at birth than our bodies are identically formless at birth. Twins raised apart, for example, are far more similar mentally than unrelated siblings raised in the same household, with genetically related siblings falling in between.

Pinker is well aware how incendiary this will sound to many contemporary ears, and his book is largely an attempt to defuse resistance to these ideas about the origins of human nature. In this, the book is an unqualified success. There is nothing in the notion of an innate human nature that threatens standard liberal values. Chief among the reasons why not is clarity about the distinction between moral and factual questions. Political equality is not a factual claim about the distribution of innate abilities; it is a prescription, intending to give people with the same abilities equal opportunities. To think otherwise is to lay our values open to empirical refutation -- as if genetic differences could make us rescind the principle that everyone should be given a fair shake in life. The crucial distinction here is between what is biologically natural and what is morally good. Pinker labors at length, and effectively, to rid us of the tendency to equate the natural with the virtuous. Evolution is a ruthlessly amoral process, and its results are often nasty, brutish and long.

Consider rape. Pinker has a well-judged section about why rape may be biologically natural (it's an effective way to get your genes into the next generation if you have no other options) while being thoroughly immoral.

Some people find it difficult to separate these attributes, so they suppose that a biologist who finds an evolutionary explanation for rape must be somehow condoning it. This is totally confused, resulting from a conflation of the natural (in the evolutionary sense) with the moral. There are many aspects of human nature -- violence, clannishness, nepotism, lying and cheating -- that have an evolutionary basis, yet they are deplorable nonetheless. The moral sense is the part of our nature that passes judgment on these natural foibles and vices, and it is a powerful force in human affairs.

Nor should we suppose that the genes determine human behavior, in the sense that they make certain actions inevitable. The genes may make rape more probable than it would be without their existence, but they certainly don't determine a person to rape. For rape to occur, the countervailing forces of conscience and prudence have to fail to prevent what is only a latent tendency.

In other words, we have to learn to control ourselves. Pinker quotes Katherine Hepburn in "The African Queen": "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we were put in this world to rise above." Human nature is a mixture of innate tendencies, some good, some bad, and we have to strive to make the good outweigh the bad. This sounds like old-fashioned common sense, but it is amazing how much of contemporary intellectual life is dogmatically against it.

Pinker is here opposing what he calls the doctrine of the noble savage -- the idea that we are born virtuous and that it is only society that warps and corrupts us. Such a view, he says, is radically at variance with everything we know of the natural world. I agree with Pinker about this, but I think he is wrong to pin the noble savage-myth on the blank-slate myth. Obviously, to think that we are naturally virtuous is inconsistent with the idea that we are born in the neutral mode: In the noble savage account of things, the slate already has virtue inscribed upon it. In the weakest section of the book, Pinker tries to forge a connection here, as if all error sprung from the same anti-nativist source. But the blank slate and noble savage are quite distinct ideas, in clear tension with each other, and each has its own historical source.

The same is true of Pinker's third misguided dogma, the ghost in the machine -- the view that the mind is an immaterial substance free from biology and the brain. Descartes is the historical founder of this dualistic view, but he was one of the early nativists, and not a noted Romantic. The three dogmas are really quite independent of one another.

Steven Pinker has written an extremely good book -- clear, well argued, fair, learned, tough, witty, humane, stimulating. I only hope that people study it carefully before rising up ideologically against him. If they do, they will see that the idea of an innately flawed but wonderfully rich human nature is a force for good, not evil. •

Colin McGinn is professor in the department of philosophy at Rutgers University. His most recent book is "The Making of a Philosopher."

© 2002 The Washington Post Company