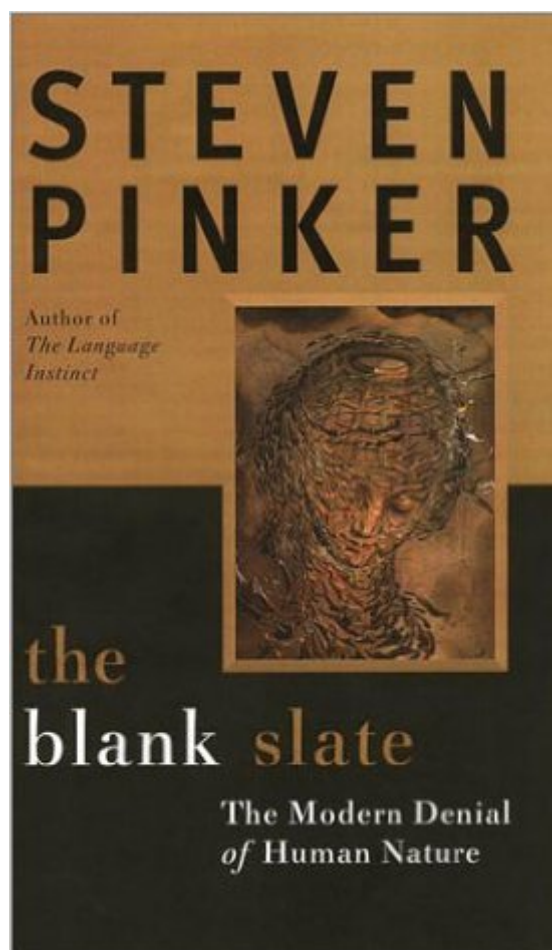


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The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial Of Human Nature



Synopsis

Our conceptions of human nature affect everything aspect of our lives, from child-rearing to politics to morality to the arts. Yet many fear that scientific discoveries about innate patterns of thinking and feeling may be used to justify inequality, to subvert social change, and to dissolve personal responsibility. In *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker explores the idea of human nature and its moral, emotional, and political colorings. He shows how many intellectuals have denied the existence of human nature and instead have embraced three dogmas: The Blank Slate (the mind has no innate traits), The Noble Savage (people are born good and corrupted by society), and The Ghost in the Machine (each of us has a soul that makes choices free from biology). Each dogma carries a moral burden, so their defenders have engaged in desperate tactics to discredit the scientists who are now challenging them. Pinker provides calm in the stormy debate by disentangling the political and moral issues from the scientific ones. He shows that equality, compassion, responsibility, and purpose have nothing to fear from discoveries about an innately organized psyche. Pinker shows that the new sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution, far from being dangerous, are complementing observations about the human condition made by millennia of artists and philosophers. All this is done in the style that earned his previous books many prizes and worldwide acclaim: irreverent wit, lucid exposition, and startling insight on matters great and small.

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Customer Reviews

Cultural relativism, the intellectual underpinnings of which rest on a faith (whether acknowledged or not) in the supremacy of nurture over nature, has had a long run. But has its boiler run out of steam

at last? In his latest and by far his most ambitious work, Steven Pinker tells us, in a lively but dispassionate voice of sweet reason, that the answer is yes. His demolition of cultural relativism may well make him a lot of enemies. He's touched on many of these same ideas before, but now he is spelling out the consequences - and the incompatibility of those consequences with the received wisdom of most of the last century. His fundamental message is: Yes, Virginia, there is a human nature. People of all cultures are born with a host of inborn predispositions - to acquire language and music, to favor kin over strangers, to desire sex and to be ashamed of it, to value even trades and to punish cheaters, and dozens more. Our common nature springs from our common biology; it is not very malleable, and it is not "socially constructed." Cultural diversity is marvelous, but it is all a variation on an immutable theme; and there have never been any human cultures free of war, of greed, or of prescribed gender roles. (Any more than there have ever been any free of conflict resolution techniques, altruism, and shared parenting.) His secondary theme is that the differences between people, so much smaller than what we have in common, are also primarily biologically determined. A juggernaut of data has finally put the nature/nurture controversy to rest, at least from a scientific standpoint, and the final score is pretty much nature one, nurture zero. Fifty to seventy percent of the variation between individuals - in intelligence, in personality, in political leanings, or just about any other mental character you care to name - derives from the genes; zero to ten percent derives from the home environment; and the mysterious remainder is due to chance or to non-parental environment. We have been conditioned in recent decades to think of both these contentions as shocking. They violate two precepts Pinker designates the "sacred doctrines in modern intellectual life." He calls them The Blank Slate (with a nod to Locke), and The Noble Savage (with a nod to Rousseau.) The first holds that ideas, likes, dislikes, and personalities are all the result of what Locke called "sense impressions", that is, they are all imprinted on us by our environments. The second is a little more modest, but forms the seductive core of the first, because we'd all like it to be true. It holds that all our unpleasant ideas, likes, dislikes, and neurotic tics are forced by a wicked society upon an infant slate which is, if not blank, devoid of all blemish. Pinker spends the first hundred pages tracing the lineage of these sacred doctrines (and of a third, neither so carefully examined nor so carefully defined, which he calls The Ghost in the Machine. The philosophers who originated the phrase were trying to deny the reality of consciousness, but what Pinker is trying to deny turns out to be narrower - essentially, the doctrine that whatever biological nature we may have can be overridden by a soul or self with a free will independent of biology.) He explores what has made the three doctrines attractive to all of us, but especially to the academic left, and the deep fears which have made it taboo, as E.O. Wilson found to his cost, to contradict

them. He then explains, carefully and (at least with respect to the first two) convincingly, why the fears in question are groundless - and why we should rather fear the ill effects of suppressing this new knowledge about human nature. Finally, he takes up in a series of individual chapters several of the hot-button political and social issues that are affected by the existence of an objective human nature, and by the largely genetic basis of most human differences: the source of the left/right divide in politics, the root causes of violence, what objective gender differences (and the biological influences bearing on rape) do and do not mean for public policy, the coming irrelevance of the child-rearing advice industry, and a rather curmudgeonly take on what he sees as the well-deserved unpopularity of avant-garde art. The child-rearing chapter is particularly eye-opening, while the violence chapter offers some fairly fresh ideas, not so much on its origins, which are the same for us as for chimpanzees, but on the variables affecting its expression. Also notable is Pinker's calm, complete demolition, on strictly biological grounds, of the notion that an embryo is "ensouled" at the moment of conception. (Perhaps still more notable, and indicative of the book's even tenor for all its polemics, is his refusal to draw any pro-choice conclusion from that.) It's a joy to see some of Pinker's more irrational targets, from die-hard Marxism to the rejection of science itself by "critical theory" to the bromide that rape isn't "about" sexual desire, skewered with such swift and classical neatness. The longer lasting pleasures will come from a leisurely unpacking and sifting of all his positive conjectures, conclusions, and insights. It's a book you can zip through in a couple of nights, or return to for thought-fodder for years.

Wow! About two years ago, I read Pinker's 'The Language Instinct.' Barely a year had passed before I read his 'How the Mind Works' and 'Words and Rules.' Each, of course, was amazing, erudite, well-researched and completely entertaining. I didn't think it possible but Pinker has gracefully outdone himself. Not only entertaining, this book is one that HAD to be written and I'm sure glad Steven Pinker thought the same! The title, 'The Blank Slate' is one of three commonplace theories that Pinker sees as contributing to the misdirection of politics, society and science in general. In brief, the belief that we are all interchangeable tabula rasas (the blank slate), that we are born with only good instincts only to be corrupted by society (the noble savage) and the existence of 'higher' spirit or soul in each human body (the ghost in the machine.) It's not hard to see why the blank slate is a bogus theory. Humans, as products, of biology have innate urges and are in a sense, genetically INCLINED towards certain behavior. Why is the blank slate dangerous? Belief that crime can be 'unlearned' through rehabilitation, that 'reality' is simply a synonym for 'conditioned belief' that can be reframed at will, and that there is no thing as measured intelligence- all of these

beliefs lead to socially disastrous consequences. It should be said that the authors goal is not shock us, stir up unnecessary controversy or get off on offending his readers. This is not an anti-PC book; in fact, Pinker is admirably calm and well-reasoned. He discusses sciences relations to social policy, but doesn't preach about or disclose his political leanings. He talks about feminism but where he comes out against 'gender feminism,' he has nothing but praise for feminisms goals of parity and equality. To be sure, he lets us know that evolutionary science has tended to point towards the right by showing us that marxist and postmodernist interpretations of 'social reality' to be untrue. On the other hand, though, Pinker shows us that sciences insistence that while biology doesn't explain everything, it factors in to more than we think, alienates the right-wingers and backs certain left-leaning theories. In this way, science, and hence Pinker's book, is apolitical. In close, I have to affirm an observation below. At first glance, a commentary on the problem in the arts and humanities by scientist, Pinker seems not only a far stretch, but snooty. After reading the book in full though, I can easily say that it is not only the best chapter of the book, it ranks amongst the best discourses on the 'humanities slump' that I've ever read, easily beating out most by humanities professors. This book deserves every piece of it's 5 stars and then some!!!

Steven Pinker's book is a wonderful explication of what we now know about human nature. As such, it mounts a powerful attack on postmodernist attempts to argue that humans are completely malleable and socially constructed. The book reminds me most of David Hume's A Treatise on Human Nature. Like Hume, Pinker attacks the reigning orthodoxies and pieties of the politically and religiously correct. Because of such sacrilege, he will be attacked as an immoralist, just as Hume was. But like Hume, Pinker is in reality engaged in a deeply moral enterprise. By dispelling myths that are often propogated by ideologues to advance their agenda (such as the myth that the average man and woman differ only anatomically and not in their desires and interests), he makes it easier to understand the real costs and benefits of different social policies (such as quotas for women, whether in college athletics or on the job). By helping us understand the biological wellsprings of our conflicts with others, be they parents, children, friends, or mates, he provides an important step to living with them more humanely and kindly. In perhaps its most completely original chapter, the book even uses his a theory of biologically shaped human nature to diagnose the discontents of much modern art, and if taken to heart, may show a way out of the cul de sac in which those who claim the mind is a blank slate have trapped many proud artistic traditions. The Blank Slate is a vaccination against the characteristic follies and errors of postmodernism and as such should be required reading for all students at our often diseased universities.

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