

**THE BLANK SLATE: THE MODERN  
DENIAL OF HUMAN NATURE  
BY STEPHEN PINKER**

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*The Blank Slate*, by the noted psychologist Steven Pinker, is an ambitious effort to convey principles of evolutionary psychology and a computational theory of mind to the general public. I believe this to be an important book for psychoanalytic thinkers to acquaint themselves with because its subject speaks to very basic issues, which psychoanalysts have traditionally considered to fall within the purview of our field. Furthermore, its author is seen by many in academia and in the media as one of the foremost authorities on matters of the mind. As a contemporary theory of humanity and, especially, of human behavior, the effort by Pinker incorporates findings and theories from biology, cognitive science, neurosciences, and evolutionary psychology. But first Pinker addresses basic philosophical issues which too many of us risk neglecting when thinking about our field. Pinker is an erudite and engaging writer who is in no way phobic to the use of wit in conveying his ideas. He makes an otherwise daunting subject enjoyable. I find much to admire about this work and, frankly, every bit as much to criticize about it.

Pinker contends that the idea that there is such a thing as human nature remains a modern taboo. He is concerned that psychology has attempted “to explain all thoughts, feeling and behavior with a few simple mechanisms of learning” (p. 6). Although we can all recognize this description as behaviorism, Pinker further associates a Blank Slate model (i.e., a model which views humans as being born as blank slates with experience/environment doing all the shaping of them) to another movement one might not consider to be related, i.e., postmodernism. Thus, for Pinker, not only are Skinner & Co. Blank Slaters (something almost every psychology major could tell us), but so are Foucault et al. Think “social constructivism” and one may begin to get an idea of how Pinker attempts to link these seemingly different views together under the Blank Slate tent. Namely if “reality” is nothing but a social construction or a form of consensual agreement, Pinker would appear to argue that postmodernism is in essence a flowery, but misguided, form of behaviorism. The fact that Skinner and crew believe in the scientific method and objective truth whereas the social constructivists do not doesn’t seem relevant to him.

Although many of our ideals are purported to stem from a Blank Slate model of humanity (e.g., the ideal of equality before the law based upon the principle that all people are created equal), Pinker argues that using the Blank Slate as a means to justify these ideals is intellectually lazy. He argues forcefully that many models of humanity, formal and

informal, are thoroughly ensconced with Blank Slate assumptions. For example, he is highly critical of virtually the entire body of work involving child rearing. No matter what one's model of the child or family is, Pinker seems to believe that all books or manuals which seek to give advice to parents about how to bring up their children are actually perpetrating a grand hoax. He painstakingly marshals a great deal of research on personality factors, twin studies and other facets of behavioral genetics in the service of the general thesis that no particular child rearing technique has any effect whatsoever on the "kind of person" the child becomes. He indicates that too much of the parenting literature implicitly or explicitly suggests that children are infinitely malleable. He contends that there is an ever-growing body of research, which shows this to be nonsense.

He argues that the entire field of research regarding child-rearing techniques is hopelessly confounded with genetics. A particular parenting technique may seem to "work" because the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree. The child has the parents' genes, and the parents' genes influence their parenting techniques as well as the child's behavior and temperament. He maintains that the entire field of research regarding child rearing styles or techniques is confounded (and corrupted) by failing to take into account that the child shares genes with the parents and that genes may play an enormous role in "what kind of person" the child becomes.

"What kind of person" is a curiously vague phrase he repeats ritualistically throughout much of the book. He seems to equate the results of objective personality tests (such as factors like introversion/extroversion, openness to experience, neuroticism, etc.) with the "kind" of person you are. He finds no evidence that parenting techniques or styles have any influence on one's scores on such personality tests and concludes that parents have little to no influence on what "kind" of person the child becomes. His entire argument rests upon the dubious assumption that everything important about a person and a person's life can be captured from taking an hour-long personality inventory. In Pinker's description, individuals seem to have few nuances or experiences of any significance. Pinker's *person* appears to be not a subject but only an object. He argues that most of the research in the field would need to be redone controlling for genes. Until this happens, he remains convinced that parents have little effect on the development of their child's personality.

He chides the child rearing industry for "making" mothers feel guilty and concerned that they are not good enough parents, as if mothers would be guilt free were it not for Dr. Spock or T. Berry Brazelton. Although he considers parenting to be an ethical responsibility and that parents have a duty to treat their children ethically, he seems to assume that such ethical treatment is easily grasped by most people, save those who seriously neglect or abuse their children. He offers no basis from which parents could make ethical choices. I found it interesting that he describes parents as having so little effect on their children (despite living

with them and having much power over their lives) but portrays the child rearing industry as having such a large (destructive) effect on parents (despite it being little more than information contained in books a parent chooses to buy and could put down at any moment).

In addition to the Blank Slate, Pinker casts stones at two related underlying assumptions which also contribute to the denial of human nature in his opinion: “the ghost in the machine” and “the noble savage.” The *ghost in the machine* (a term coined by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle) concerns Descartes’ thesis that the mind is composed of immaterial substances and is distinct/different from the material world. The perspective of the *noble savage* (a view most closely associated with the French philosopher Rousseau though, as Pinker notes, the term actually comes from Dryden) claims that humans are naturally good but become corrupt through society’s influence. Pinker critiques Descartes in a way that has become quite a familiar trope for contemporary writers of psychology. Namely, Pinker argues that there is no such thing as immaterial substances (or at least no empirical evidence that these exist) and that all human thought and behavior must, therefore, be governed according to the laws of nature. The mind is not separate from the physical world but is coexistent with the brain (or, in essence, is the brain). Peeing on Descartes’ grave seems to have become the modern intellectual’s rite of passage. Pinker is essentially a biological reductionist and can’t understand why this view gets such a bad reputation in psychological circles. He dismisses concerns about biological reductionism as confused or ignorant.

Yet like many who dismiss Cartesian dualism, he seems to experience no dissonance, let alone a sense of irony, conversing in the very psychological language for which Cartesianism is largely responsible. It’s like throwing someone out of office for corruption, only to take over his job and pork out on his perks. Although suggesting that evolutionary psychology combined with information processing will shed new light, the upshot never seems as radical or impressive as promised. He rightly critiques dualism, but does not really seem to improve upon the basic psychological way of thinking derived from it (which, in my opinion, is true for many of Descartes’ critics). Dualism certainly seems wanting in many ways.

The idea of the mind as an immaterial substance certainly appears naive in light of contemporary research on the brain as well as in physics and chemistry per se. Yet Descartes suggested to us the consciousness of humanity and our self-consciousness which both helped liberate people from authoritarianisms promulgated by church and state and also helped prepare Western civilization to cultivate many new liberties (including the eventual liberty to conduct research in genetics and neurosciences). Isn’t a little gratitude in order? Could Jefferson have conceived of “... and the pursuit of happiness” as a right were it not for a Descartes? I would suggest that Pinker and his fellow reductionists seem unwilling to follow the logic of their position far enough. By considering the microscopic level as the only true

level, he loses sight that we conceive of phenomena at various levels.

For instance, one could claim that money consists of a configuration of subatomic particles and is moved from place to place. So should we now turn to physics in order to understand the economy? There are many hints in his work that he sees it as reasonable to talk psychologically (as opposed to wording everything in the language of biology). It seems important to Pinker to exorcise the ghost in the machine but perfectly acceptable to speak of the brain as having “emergent features.” However, his rendition of “emergent features” seems alluringly similar to the Cartesian ghost (for all practical purposes). Pinker himself is interested at staying at the level of biology and argues it is not necessary to go down to basic physics to study the influence of genes. But why is reductionism good medicine for psychology and not for biology? He offers little explanation. It stands declared but not explained. Too often throughout his book Pinker *declares* in this manner while providing little explanation or justification. To my mind (or must I now say, to the emergent features of my brain?), his version of evolutionary psychology and genetics can start to feel like a new brand of authoritarianism. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

In essence Pinker does not seem to manage speaking as both a biologist and as a psychologist. By laying the foundation to understand humans in only a strictly naturalistic (physical/literal) manner, he loses credibility when he attempts to say that human values and biological facts are somehow distinct. His entire argument rests upon understanding all human thought and behavior as the by-product of natural selection and neurophysiology. Yet he worries that to understand values and ethics in naturalistic terms inevitably leads to the possibility of people not assuming responsibility for their actions (see also Malik, 2002). This would have serious, untoward consequences. It could become a “my genes made me do it” defense for all sorts of behaviors. He attempts to view human values as not derived from nature in the same way that certain personality traits are claimed to be. He warns of the naturalistic fallacy in moral reasoning (i.e., if it’s found in nature, it must be good) and the moralistic fallacy (i.e., if it’s good, it must be found in nature). Yet by abandoning the Blank Slate philosophers (e.g., Locke et al.) he essentially tosses out the recognized foundation for the very values he cherishes while providing no other philosophical mechanism for deriving them.

He virtually takes all values of liberal democracy as given and then tries to reverse reason his way toward not finding any incompatibility between them and his doctrine of human nature, i.e., that much of our behavior is a derivative of genes and all is a product of evolution (which would have to include our values, right?). He seems to argue that these values are universal and not contingent upon anything else while simultaneously arguing that all human thought is contingent upon natural selection. One could ask, are these values strictly products of human thought or are they universal? Were they created or were

they discovered? It often sounds as if he conceptualizes human values as universal and not a product of nature, but that doesn't seem to square with the biological reductionism he proudly espouses throughout the book. If there is nothing but the physical world, where are these moral values located? His conception of values and morality seems close to introducing a new ghost in the machine. I'll call it Descartes' revenge from the grave. Trying to reconcile the values of liberal democracy with a theory of human nature may be a worthy goal, but it is not accomplished via a pronouncement of compatibility. His position seems to be inconsistent or in conflict.

He attempts to explore the idea that biology has endowed us with competing urges. Thus, he gets close to beginning to outline a model of psychic conflict. This brings his thinking into more direct relevance for and possible conversation with psychoanalysis per se. But he does not draw out a thorough analysis of how these competing biological tendencies should ever tilt in one direction or the other or achieve some sort of compromise. This is mostly because his model lacks any version of a dynamic unconscious. Without his saying this directly, his model is a horizontal model of conflict with no vertical component.

He acknowledges that people have unconscious processes but disparages any form of a psychoanalytic (i.e., dynamic) version of the unconscious. His version of the unconscious is more static and limited. Curiously enough he practically mocks a concept such as the Oedipus Complex. However, when he attempts to illustrate the powerful, non-rational tug of evolution, he uses the device of a make believe story of brother-sister incest (where all of the "usual," rational objections to incest are made moot to show that people still think it's wrong anyway). His dismissal of the incest conflict in the form of the Oedipus Complex and his use of the parable of brother-sister incest are separated by many pages. If one thinks associatively (as psychoanalytic thinkers do), it becomes an interesting juxtaposition.

He gives Freud a bit of credit for emphasizing biological urges and clearly recognizes that Freud was no Blank Slater. He displays some sympathy for Freud's *tragic vision* of humanity. But for the most part, he appears to think little of psychoanalysis as a theory of mind. Despite quoting Freud and mentioning Freudian concepts a fair amount, his huge bibliography contains not one citation of Freud. He essentially dismisses psychoanalysis (or a parody of psychoanalysis) because he feels it is entirely worthless for people to spend their time talking in order to change things about themselves (he envisions the entirety of analysis to be analysands complaining about their parents; he says that patients "while away the hour" on such things). From his theory parents have virtually no effect on what "kind" of people their children become (except having passed along their genes). So why talk about them? He seems to have the unspoken assumption that therapists think the purpose of therapy is to shift a person from one box of a personality profile matrix into another box

(like trying to turn an introvert into an extrovert). He can't seem to conceive of talking about oneself as fostering any kind of self-understanding, which a person could find valuable in any way. Of course, if he really believes this, why should one attend a university and listen to lectures by professors such as Pinker? Surely, that can never affect what "kind" of person you become.

Pinker dismisses forms of therapy that may explore childhood conflicts, yet he seems to have only a cartoon version of how therapy proceeds and shows no knowledge whatsoever of psychotherapy literature. In part this derives from the model he erects. His version of human nature is one, which is very difficult to apply to any particular person. This is very much a theory about how or why certain "traits" exist in humanity. It is a study and theory of not only large groups but of the existence of traits in the abstract. How one might use evolutionary psychology and a computational theory of mind to understand *a* person is elusive.

In fact I would argue that the entire field of evolutionary psychology is poorly named. Based upon Pinker's presentation it seems that it would be more appropriately named evolutionary sociology or, better, evolutionary anthropology. It is interesting that proponents insist it be called a psychology and want to toss out the mind from this psychology. Now it is true that much of Freud's writings could be said to fall under sociology or anthropology, but it is clear that psychoanalysis is used to understand individuals. A psychology that has little, if any, interest in understanding an individual hardly seems to be a psychology at all. In principle a theory of psychology based upon genetics could suggest individual uniqueness. Since no two people, save identical twins, have the exact same set of genes, there is plenty of room to consider the uniqueness of individuals.

Strangely, evolutionary psychology appears to be striving to grasp only for the broadest generalizations and foreclose much consideration of the individual. Although clearly an important development in trying to understand humanity, too often evolutionary psychology comes close to sounding pat, a criticism often aimed at psychoanalysis.

Any trait in question exists because it enabled the survival of the species, so the story goes. Even competing traits have ensured the survival of the species (e.g., the existence of both greed and altruism). The existence of the trait itself becomes the only empirical evidence of its survival value. This flirts with circularity. There is little consideration of how we categorize such "traits" to begin with. Pinker among others can come up with fanciful conjectures about the process, which might have led to the survival of one trait or another (or what gives it survival value). However, traits evolve over thousands or millions of years. It is, of course, impossible to run experiments to test hypotheses when we have to wait a few

million years for the result. Evidence must accrue in other ways. So evolutionary psychologists have become good at thought experiments.

To borrow a fanciful conjecture from evolutionary psychology (but from another book called *The Mating Mind* by Geoffrey Miller), this discipline (including Pinker's version) considers the Oedipus Complex to be a fiction based upon a misunderstanding of children. For example, Miller would contend that the child's behavior, which is misinterpreted by analysts as sexual interest in the parent is really behavior, which communicates the child's "fitness" in general. Parents are interested in the child's fitness because the child passes on their genes. A fit child is more likely to pass on their genes. But one doesn't even need much exposure to psychoanalysis to find this explanation/understanding lacking. Even to step onto the territory of evolutionary psychology for a moment, one could surely say that part of the child's fitness to pass on genes should include sexual curiosity, sexual interest, the precursor behaviors to sexual relations, etc. Who, generally, has the closest emotional bonds to the child and why wouldn't the child direct this sexual interest toward those with whom he/she shares such a deep emotional attachment? Why would there even need to be an incest taboo in the absence of any such feelings on the part of child and parents? The existence of an incest taboo long precedes the development of liberal democracies and child abuse laws. It is interesting that a discipline, which focuses so much on sexuality and the passing on of genes can't allow for any form of childhood sexuality. Perhaps many years hence, this field will "shock" academia with the "discovery" of childhood sexuality after having tossed Freud over the cliff long before.

Pinker claims that there are many negative repercussions to a Blank Slate model. Not only does this include the aforementioned child rearing practices, but also modern art, totalitarianism, relativism, postmodern literature, liberal criminology, and so forth. He holds that a Blank Slate model necessarily leads to these supposed ills. As reviewer Kenan Malik intoned, Pinker trots out a Blank Slate model "as a general-purpose bogeyman responsible for every bad idea in the 20th century-or, at least, every one that Pinker dislikes." He tries to address the usual concerns people express about genetically based models of humanity. For example, it is often suggested that one risk in letting genetics assume center stage has been experimentation with things like eugenics and beliefs in a master race. Pinker holds that there is nothing, which *compels* one to go down that path by assuming a genetically based model of human nature. He argues essentially that the horrors of the Nazis, for example, were the result of (among other things) a motivated *misapplication* and misunderstanding of a genetic view of humanity. He holds that one can have a genetically based model of humanity and not espouse a master race philosophy (and even be vehemently opposed to such a philosophy). That seems fair enough in and of itself.

However, he won't allow his opponents the same possibility, namely that some issues he

raises as concerns could likewise be *misapplications* of a Blank Slate model. Furthermore, many from his list of “problems” seem based not upon scientific criteria but upon some other, more personal criteria masquerading as science. Surely he can’t be trying to say that *science* has proven that postmodern literature is bad. He doesn’t prove it to be nefarious in the first place, let alone that his assessment of it has anything whatsoever to do with science. Venturing onto territory which is of a more political nature and claiming his views are connected to a *science* of human nature begins to undermine his earlier, thoroughly laid out arguments that one must be careful in assuming the political can be a smooth and easy extension of the scientific.

Although I have had much to criticize about this book, I strongly encourage psychoanalysts and those who work with others psychoanalytically to read this book. This book represents, in many ways, a road map to the future of the mind sciences. Many of Pinker’s arguments are well thought out and very challenging of us. He is highly respected by the majority of mainstream academicians in psychology and the neurosciences. If we are to engage in any meaningful dialogue with those from within the mainstream of contemporary “mind” studies, we owe it to ourselves, our field and to the spirit of collegial discourse to become more familiar with this area. *The Blank Slate: the Modern Denial of Human Nature* represents a thoughtful entree into this field.

### References

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