

Book Review

Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate, The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Penguin Group, New York, 2002

Steven Pinker is a professor of psychology in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the author of *How the Mind Works* and *The Language Instinct*, and is one of the most noted scientists in the field of evolutionary psychology. In this book he attacks three myths: the Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine—or, as philosophers call them, empiricism, romanticism, and dualism—logically independent but often seen together. All three deny much of a role for innate human nature.

The Blank Slate myth, also known by its Latin name, *tabula rasa*, says that humans are born with only a few innate instincts (e.g., sucking) and get their ultimate personalities and aptitudes from their environment through socialization and learning. Yet now we know that humans are born with universal mental mechanisms for language acquisition and social interaction, and get at least 50% of their personal traits from their inherited genes.

The Noble Savage myth says that mankind is naturally peaceful and non-violent. Archeological evidence and current primitive cultures show that this is not true. Primitive societies were, and are, much more “warlike” and violent than modern societies (even the very bad ones).

The Ghost in the Machine myth says there is a non-biological entity, usually called the “soul,” that is more or less in charge of the human body. Science has no support for this unnecessary assumption.

The four frontiers of science, collective known as sociobiology, that discredit these myths are (1) cognitive science, the science of mind; (2) neuroscience, the study of how cognition and emotions are implemented; (3) behavioral genetics, how genes affect behavior; and (4) evolutionary psychology, the study of the phylogenetic history and adaptive functions of the mind.

Cognitive science shows that mental life can be explained in terms of information, computation, and feedback, with no need for a Ghost in the Machine. The mind is a complex system comprising many interacting parts, with some mechanisms that are universal and could hardly be learned (e.g., a mechanism for learning language). Infinite behaviors can be generated by finite combinatorial programs in the mind.

Agreeing with this is the highly respected cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Vilayanur S. Ramachandran of the University of California San Diego, who writes:

“All the richness of our mental life—all our feelings, our emotions, our thoughts, our ambitions, our love life, our religious sentiments and even what each of us regards as his own intimate private self—is simply the activity of these little specks of jelly in your head, in you brain. There is nothing else.”

Sir Francis Crick, who died in 2004, said much the same thing. He called it “the amazing hypothesis.”

Neuroscientists have nailed down the innate differences between men and women. Not in intelligence, or moral reasoning, but differences (e.g., emotions, pain tolerance, sexual attitudes) attributable to the influences of hormones, which in turn derive from the expression of genes on their different chromosomes (XX for women, XY for men).

Behavioral geneticists have found that the five major ways in which psychologists say personalities differ are heritable, with perhaps 40 to 50 per cent of the variation in a typical population tied to differences in their genes, hardly any of it attributable to family influences, with some 50 per cent of the variation unaccounted for. The five major traits can be easily remembered using the mnemonic “OCEAN”: Open to experience or incurious, Conscientious or undirected, Extrovert or introvert, Agreeable or antagonistic, Neurotic or stable.

Identical twins share many innate tendencies even though separated at birth and raised in very different environments. Siblings tend to differ greatly in personality even when raised in the same environment, but are more alike than non-siblings raised with them. A man is abusive because his father abused him? More likely the trait was inherited rather than learned.

All this new knowledge is rejected by those who can’t abandon their cherished beliefs, often because of four major fears:

(1) The fear of inequality, that recognizing innate differences in humans leads to discrimination and injustice. However, just because people are born different does not justify treating them unequally. Male and female brains are now known to differ, but that should play no role in career *assignments*, which should instead be career *choices*, with merit-based success. Gender feminists deny any physical difference, while equity feminists correctly accept it while struggling for equality of opportunity.

(2) The fear of imperfectibility, that people who are born imperfect must remain so. While born psychopaths are unlikely to become saintly, undesirable traits can usually be modified or controlled sufficiently well to satisfy society’s demands. The naturalist fallacy says that whatever happens in nature is good, while the moralist fallacy says that if a trait is moral it must be found in nature. As Katherine Hepburn said to Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, “Mr. Allnut, nature is what we are put in this world to rise above.”

(3) The fear of determinism, that deep down we are not responsible for, or in control of, our life

choices. Inheriting tendencies does not mean we cannot be held responsible, with consequent discouragement, for undesirable behaviors. We do have free will. It is the individual, not society, who must be corrected.

(4) The fear of nihilism, which has two versions, religious and secular. The religious fear is that a materialistic view of the mind is inherently amoral. However, evolution has endowed us with a moral sense, which we have expanded through reason, knowledge, and sympathy for others, more moral than religions that have been the cause of millions murdered. The secular fear is that biology drains life of meaning because it deflates the values we most cherish. It is not understood that how an organism evolves through natural selection is not how it operates here and now. The motives of our genes (copying themselves) do not map one-to-one with the motives of the organism that they create.

Pinker has five chapters on what he calls “Hot Button” subjects: Politics, Violence, Gender, Children, and The Arts. In each he shows that adherence to the five myths is holding back the advance of civilization. A final chapter, The Voice of the Species, sums it all up. The Blank Slate’s dark side is that it leads to totalitarianism and perverts education, child rearing, and the arts to forms of social engineering. Its corollary, the Noble Savage, invites contempt for the principles of democracy, “and in matters of policy it has elevated sappy dogmas above workable solutions.” And he wrote earlier, “all acts are products of cognitive and emotional systems in the brain,” not chosen by a Ghost in the Machine.

Marvin L. French

mfrench1@san.rr.com

www.marvinfrench.com