

# The Nature of Human Nature

## The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature

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The most fundamental question in psychology, indeed in all the social sciences, is: What is the nature of human nature? The dominant answer for the past century has been the 'Blank Slate', the theory that the human mind comes equipped with little or no inherent structure. Each person's mind has been inscribed during development, according to this view, by parents, teachers, society, culture, and media messages. The corollary is the doctrine of the Noble Savage, the theory that "humans in their natural state are selfless, peaceable, and untroubled", and that jealousy, greed, conflict, and aggression are contemporary ills caused by the corrupting influence of civilization.

These core doctrines come in many guises – radical behaviorism, social constructionism, postmodernism, environmental determinism, cultural determinism, and even some current theories of neural "plasticity". In *The Blank Slate* (TBS), a book monumental in scope and scholarship, Professor Steven Pinker shows that this dominant dogma has long outlived its scientific warrant.

Contrary to the blank slate, Pinker argues, humans are not passive receptacles or empty vessels. Anyone who has raised a child knows this, of course, but scientific theories sometimes lag behind what everyone knows. We come equipped, according to TBS, with an astonishing array of evolved mechanisms – innate fears of heights, predators, evolved desires for particular mates; hostility toward out-group members; biases toward investing in children and kin; and dozens of others.

TBS keeps the reader riveted by interspersing penetrating arguments with evidence, anecdotes, humorous illustrations, historical accounts of academic disputes, and well-placed quotations from literature, film, and popular music. I was simultaneously amused and horrified to read of the debating tactics of some blank slate proponents, including prominent professors, who have resorted to doctoring the quotations of opponents, calling them nasty names, and even impugning their sex lives.

Debates about human nature have long been acrimonious. Pinker brings a calm and incisive voice to these contentious issues. He shows how acknowledging an innate human nature does not have commonly feared consequences, such as resignation to an unalterable fate, despair about improving the human condition or justification of evil deeds. Indeed, he shows how the doctrine of environmental determinism has led to some of the most common modern travesties. Mass killings



By Steven Pinker

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by Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao were all driven, in part, by blank slate ideology. Recent decades have also witnessed people fobbing off personal responsibility for crimes by using the abuse excuse, the Twinkie defense, the "pornography made me do it" defense, or by blaming media violence, rock lyrics, or different cultural norms.

Pinker is at his best when dissecting the underlying logic of scientific arguments, exposing flaws in reasoning, and showing the errors of scientists who let ideologies cloud their thinking. TBS could be criticized for failing to provide pat prescriptions for grappling with the multi-faceted human nature that modern science illuminates. How can we strive for meaning and morality, for example, when confronted with contradictory components of a nature that contains both sexual treachery and life-long love, homicidal impulses and compassionate self-sacrifice? But Pinker's goal is not primarily prescriptive. He aims to uproot deeply entrenched but now outmoded assumptions about the human mind and confront a nature that is glorious in its complexity, if sometimes disturbing in its contents. On this goal, his aim is true.

This may be the most important book so far published in the 21st century. It touches practically everything we care about, from mating to children to violent international conflict. I suspect many feathers will be ruffled by TBS. But I think Pinker's final analysis is correct – the core doctrines of the blank slate and noble savage will go down in the history of science as examples of "extraordinarily popular delusions" that have had an unseemly stranglehold on the past century of scientific thought.

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