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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 by embracing three linked 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 injects calm and rationality into these debates by showing that equality, progress, responsibility, and purpose have nothing to fear from discoveries about a rich human nature. He disarms even the most menacing threats with clear thinking, common sense, and pertinent facts from science and history. Despite its popularity among intellectuals during much of the twentieth century, he argues, the doctrine of the Blank Slate may have done more harm than good. It denies our common humanity and our individual preferences, replaces hardheaded analyses of social problems with feel-good slogans, and distorts our understanding of government, violence, parenting, and the arts.

Pinker shows that an acknowledgement of human nature that is grounded in science and common sense, far from being dangerous, can complement insights 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: wit, lucidity, and insight into matters great and small.

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature Details

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Chuck McCabe says

Pinker examines the concept of the mind as a blank slate capable of taking any impressions that arose in England and France in the mid-18th century and became the basis for liberal democracy in the 19th and 20th centuries. The "blank slate" underlies the nurture pole of the nature/ nurture debate and looms huge in political and social policies. Drawing on an immense body of research in psychology and other social sciences, linguistics, and evolutionary biology, Pinker makes the case for the nature pole, arguing that it is now apparent that the human brain is not a blank slate, but in fact bears powerful imprints of our evolutionary past that in effect hardwire us to feel, respond, and behave in specific ways. The denial of this human nature is now an impediment to solving many problems that are now plaguing Western democracies. -- This is an exciting read for anyone interested in contemporary social and political issues. It powerfully summarizes a huge body of knowledge that is forcing us to rethink who we are and how we ought to organize our collective behaviors.

Sundus HameedUllah Khan says

Wow What an interesting and exquisitely written book!!!

This is my first read by this author "**Steven Pinker**". He is a psychologist and author of several books and articles on cognition and linguistics. In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* he refuted the widely held belief that the human mind at birth is a tabula rasa /blank slate to which the environment (nurture) gives form and substance.

He further explained that neither genetics nor environmental conditions are solely responsible for determining a person's behavior instead; individuals are created by a combination of both innate human nature and the conditions of upbringing and environment.

A must read for those who want to be introduced to the nature-nurture debate by examining scientific evidence.

Some of my favorite parts from the book:

There are different kinds of truth for different kinds of people. There are truths appropriate for children; truths that are appropriate for students; truths that are appropriate for educated adults and truths that are appropriate for highly educated adults and the notion that there should be one set of truths available to everyone is a modern democratic fallacy. It doesn't work.

As technology accumulates and people in more parts of the planet become interdependent, the hatred between them tends to decrease, for the simple reason that you can't kill someone and trade with him too.

The Darwin Awards, given annually to "the individuals who ensure the long-term survival of our species by removing themselves from the gene pool in a sublimely idiotic fashion", almost always go to men.

Much of what is today called "social criticism" consists of members of the upper classes denouncing the tastes of the lower classes (bawdy entertainment, fast food, plentiful consumer goods) while considering themselves egalitarians.

Ezra says

so. steven pinker got a lot of press out of this thing. it is essentially a sustained and detailed case for the predominance of genetic factors in determining human behavior. mr pinker is (if i recall) mainly a developmental neuroscientist (if that's a legitimate description...?). he provides a tremendous and very enjoyable welath of case studies and background for the various psychological, philosophical, sociological and biological problems which he subjects to the peculiar dialectical lens of nature/nurture. if you're like me, this seems sort of arbitrary and anachronistic; thomas hobbes is long dead (ideologically and otherwise), skinnerism is not so popular, etc... my problem with pinker and the rest of the current mature crop of pop-science meega-pundits (thinking kurzweil, dawkins, wolfram...), is that they have all this incredible data, and a good number of intelligent conclusions, but some impulse (hubris? frustration? hunger for fame?) drives them to waaay overstep the bounds of what is interesting or relevant about their research, seeing jingoistic intellectual bogeymen in every pop culture shadow, and turning their work into extended rants about their pet theoretical controversy that no sane person wuld care about. it's good entertainment, i suppose, if entertainment requires epic struggles of will, and this must be motivating the editors... anyays, in pinker's case i was pretty perturbed by his opening statements (declaration of war against all "blank slate" dogmas... i kinda drew a blank myself on that one), and then i proceeded to be thoroughly engrossed for many chapters, in which pinker used his considerable erudition (which seems both fairly deep and fairly broad) to lay out a really intense survey of all kids of topics that might have to do with the "nature/nurture" controversy: lots of great data on twin studies, baby studies, language studies, archeological studies... it's about 70% quotations for a while, and it's great.

then, at some point, for some reason, mr pinker decides to take it upon himself to attack feminism, postmodern philosophy, and experimental art, in the name of genetic determinism. it's an incredible reversal: this accomplished scientist, high on his case studies, suddenly ripping into minor intellectual figures in disciplines he clearly knows jack shit about. it is presumptuous, elitist, ridiculous. perhaps it is the hidden form of his particular nerd-autism, blinding him to the incredible, stereotypical flatulence of the harvard neuroscientist confidently and patiently xplaining that humans are not genetically constructed to appreciate non-figural art, that women are unhappy because feminism is forcing them to be away from home too much... THAT kind of crap. naturally, i wanted to rip his smug white face off...

so, in conclusion: if i had my own copy of this book, i might rip out the introduction and the last couple chapters and feel okay about it. maybe just keep the bibliography, though....

William2.1 says

Second reading.

Manny says

Steven Pinker takes on the old nature/nurture question, and does an excellent job of it. Are we the products of our genes or our upbringing? Pinker tells you in the first few pages what the new consensus is: both, but genes are probably more important.

He has some wonderful stories to back up the general points. Here's one that particularly appealed to me. During the 60s and 70s, you often heard that boys and girls are indoctrinated from an early age so as to conform to conventional gender roles. Without that conditioning, girls would e.g. be as likely to want to play with toy guns, or boys with dolls. It was just a theory, but it was one that many people believed.

So, says Pinker, how could we investigate the question scientifically? It's difficult. What you'd like to do, if you had the chance, would be to take a few dozen boys, castrate them at birth, surgically transform them into girls, and then raise them like other girls without ever telling them what you'd done. At various points in their development, you could compare them with a control group of biologically normal girls, and see if there were any significant differences.

Needless to say, no one would ever permit such an appallingly wicked experiment. Except that it's actually happened. Every year, it turns out that a small number of male infants do have to be castrated and turned into girls, most often as a result of botched circumcision operations. Historically, they've usually not been told what happened, since this was deemed to be in their best interests.

Studies on these unfortunate children show that they nearly always feel deeply conflicted, and quite different from other girls. They have all sorts of impulses which they feel are bizarre and wrong, and which can sometimes lead them to suicidal despair. In some cases, they have later been informed that they are actually male, and their reaction has typically been one of relief. They weren't weird after all. They were just male without knowing it.

Well, if you thought that story was interesting, he's got dozens more that are nearly as good. I loved this book.

Daniel Clausen says

In some ways, this book is both a tragedy and an inspiration.

How is it a tragedy? It's a tragedy because the book is responding to very ideologically-based, simple arguments for the Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine that I think don't really need to be addressed. Many of the points in the book I was thoroughly convinced of before reading the book -- I knew that genetics played some role in determining personality and aptitude; I was convinced of the probabilistic approach to human behavior; and I was convinced that versions of "is" do not automatically translate into "ought". On top of that, much of the book is spent rehashing the very petty politics of what happens in university departments and on college campuses -- the politicization and tribalization of

knowledge. It's a stark reminder that even in environments where people should be better and do better, they often give in to their worst instincts.

So, the book is tragic in that much of this material, in a more perfect world, could have just been skipped or ignored. The author could have begun this book from a different starting place where readers have no ideological axes to grind, open-minded examination of evidence and arguments take place, and we are all intellectually and emotionally ready to live in a world of nuance. But no, that is not the world we live in, so that is not the book we get. And that is tragic.

The book, though, is also an inspiration. Why? Because it attempts to lift the conversation to that place where nuance and evidence are grounded in a humanistic understanding of our role as scholars and thinkers. The author, through his exploration of the various themes and evidence, tries to make us all epistemic creatures -- people who can have beliefs and values but suspend them in order to explore counter-evidence, new theories, and hypotheses, and sharpen our values with our knowledge. As epistemic creatures, we would also be able to ask that all-important question: How do we know something?

In a moment in history where so much discourse is polluted by vulgarity, that is refreshing...but it's also tragic. Because in a world where we are all trained from a young age to have the epistemic and moral habits of scientists, this might have been a more nuanced and at once infinitely shorter book.

Farha Crystal says

'Man will become better when you show him what he is like.' - Anthon Chekov

Won't he??? ...

Maybe, the arguments in this book can't be put any more eloquently than the quote of Anton Chekov.

...

The book was both fun and terrible to encounter how supposed "liberals" experience the cognitive dissonance by having their assumptions and dogmas challenged.?

The author goes over controversies, a number of hot buttons, hot zones, Chernobyls, third rails, and so on -- including the arts (I disagree with him particularly), cloning, crime, free will, education, evolution, gender differences, God, homosexuality, infanticide, inequality, Marxism, morality, Nazism, parenting, politics, race, rape, religion, resource depletion, social engineering, technological risk and war.

The sciences of human nature - behavioral genetics, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science went/ are going (increasingly in the years to come) to upset various dogmas, careers, and deeply-held political belief systems.

But, we have a choice about that. The choice is whether certain facts about humans, or topics, are to be considered taboos, forbidden knowledge, where we shouldn't go there because no good can come from it, or whether we should explore them honestly.

We should remember that the versions of *"is"* do not automatically translate into *"ought"*. To acknowledge human nature is not despairing but an incentive to embrace our common humanity.

Maybe, wisdom consists in appreciating the preciousness and finiteness of our own existence, of being cognizant of what makes people everywhere tick, and therefore enhancing happiness and minimizing suffering optimally; of being alert to limitations and flaws in our own judgments and decisions and passions, and thereby doing our best to circumvent them...

L.E. Duncan says

So here's a case where you have a book about how much of our personalities and, well, nature is innate, rather than nurtured into us by our parents or our environment. If *The Blank Slate* were two hundred pages and focused just on brain science, it'd be one thing. The trouble is that it ends up reading as if Pinker gathered every single study that seemed to support his position and threw it into a blender, and then threw in a number of screeds against groups he has a bone to pick with. The result is a somewhat uneven and contradictory book where one chapter asserts that women don't go into math because they are innately unlikely to like it, and another chapter asserts that no one is innately good at complex math, which is why we have school to pound it into kids' little heads. Pinker's insistence on environment and parenting having minimal influence is sometimes undercut by the studies he presents and his own conclusions. Pinker is quick to say that differences between men and women are innate, whether it's emotional, a difference in a bell curve intelligence spread, or in general interests, but he'll attribute differences between races and ethnic groups to environment or oppression, forces he largely dismisses otherwise. Or we can note that Pinker asserts first that women are better caretakers than men, then secondly asserts that parenting is fairly irrelevant (as long as there's a man to look up to, no comments on where women fall on this influence spectrum), and then thirdly asserts that how well kids get along with parents is predictive of their overall success, which would suggest . . . parenting isn't irrelevant? He also tends to reduce complex issues, such as art or culture or rule of law to biological imperatives, which is a bit odd when he also asserts human individuality and specialness (as long as they also fall within the Norman the Normy Norms that define actual human nature, I suppose). He'll say art has no influence on anyone, really, so everyone hates modernism and post-modernism because it deconstructs art, which no one needs, because everyone knows art isn't real. And by the by, prejudices/stereotypes are often innate and have some good sense and 100% reliable statistics behind them, and these prejudices can't be strongly messed with by media or culture, although of course we should treat everyone with respect, even if they're low IQ and will never amount to anything or. Except that human nature is so violent (at least, if you're a man) and suspicious that of course we will never treat everyone with respect and don't you dare Big Brother us into doing so.

... I got carried away. But the book is absolutely exhausting, wheeling from one conclusion to the next in a mixture of hopeless pessimism, wide-eyed futurism, white-knuckled warnings about not screwing up the status quo, and sudden naivete. I also find many of the absolutely-certain-claims somewhat suspect, as if statistics/brain scans from this or that study and some anecdotes and did you know tribal people actually kill each other?? are absolute proof of what a human is. You can't point out that many media reports of "this causes cancer" or "this proves this parenting tactic successful!" often exaggerate or segment the truth without making it impossible not to notice that nothing, even studies or statistics, exists in cold, objective isolation. I'm not being post-modern here. I'm saying that the very fact I know more about Pinker from this book than I do about human nature is par for the course. Does any of this matter? Does it matter to a childless female engineer that she's some kind of biological anomaly (and is she?). Is anything helped by positing that men are naturally violent and competitive, and ignoring the uncountable exceptions, or ignoring that women also compete against other women, for mates and otherwise? Is IQ, like, this magic statistic that determines human worth in society? Are you sure you aren't a supporter of eugenics? Etc, etc, etc. We can all agree that people are not meant to be programmed, that we should not force people who want to be poets to become mathematicians to fill a quota, and we should treat people well even when they're not like us. All right? All right.

Daniel says

Louis Menand has written a typically excellent piece on Pinker's arrogance:

<http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002...>

I found this book simultaneously interesting and exasperating, because the author is obviously a highly educated, well-read man who thinks he knows everything about every subject. There is a whole class of these public intellectuals (the late Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, et al) who play this game: they use the public authority they have gained by virtue of (at least modest) academic accomplishment in one field to pronounce authoritatively on every damn thing under the sun. (Most of his scholarly journal output is in psychology and language, according to his cv; his PhD is in experimental psychology.) And maybe Pinker has figured it all out, but don't you think he could cut those of us a break who still think we exist? "Cognitive neuroscientists have not only exorcised the ghost but have shown that the brain does not even have a part that does exactly what the ghost is supposed to do: review all the facts and make a decision for the rest of the brain to carry out. Each of us there is a single I in control. But that is an illusion the brain works hard to produce..." And with that he dismisses the idea that you and I exist at all; there is no "you" there, only a collection of atoms with some remarkable properties (observable by other lumps of atoms). Wow, I am glad that's all settled. More generally, it's good to know there's no need for a field like philosophy. Pinker has a footnote to support his claim that the brain has no "I," but one of his sources (predictably) is Daniel Dennett, the Tufts philosopher and enemy of the mind (and Anything Else Immaterial). Elsewhere Pinker claims Hitler thought he was doing God's will (footnote to some article in an atheist magazine I looked up -- check out Free Inquiry, Volume 19, Issue 2, and judge for yourself whether you would *ever* cite this source in a serious academic inquiry) and that the Catholic Church teaches that 'ensoulment' takes place at the moment of conception. Let me take this last nugget for a moment. I'm guessing Pinker has spent little time in Catholic churches or reading Catholic books or magazines, so I can see why he thinks a statement like "the catholic church teaches _____" is an easy one to make. To those of us who have done some of those things, though, it is not so trivial. Sure, in broad strokes, one can formulate simple statements with confidence (e.g., that God exists or Jesus is the Son of God or even abortion is wrong), but his assertion is packed with some things that are far harder to disentangle. Most importantly, he uses the word "ensoulment" -- and this is central to his argument at this point in the book -- implying that the Church firmly teaches this concept that he is upset about. I do not know that the RCC says much (currently, anyway) dogmatically about the philosophical underpinnings of a word like "ensoulment." What I do know is that I am familiar with the phrase Ghost in the Machine (one of Pinker's bogeymen in this book) from Catholic authors who, like the late JP II, were critical of Cartesian dualism. So, I am being long-winded, but I am trying to get across that Pinker has these convenient cartoon notions of what other people say and because he is so frightfully intelligent he assumes he has it all figured out. If he would just say to himself, "It is possible that there is one thing I think I know that I do not," I believe his tone would be far more congenial and the book much improved. But then again, there is no self for him to say it to, so what's the point?

Owlseyes says

(Steven Pinker in Oporto, on the 11th of November 2017. My photo.)

"Nature, Mr Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above" Katherine Hepburn to Humphrey Bogart in The African Queen

"Hillary Clinton may have advanced the dumbest explanation in the history of psychobabble, but she does not deserve the charge of trying to excuse the president's [husband] behavior"

Pinker makes the case against a man who gets his formation/make up only from the outer forces of parenting, education, etc. He seems to defend the conception of a man who is not a "blank slate" upon which experience writes on.

He invokes genetic arguments (based on fraternal and identical twins' studies) to back his thesis. He also approaches brain analysis and anthropological studies to justify the existence of some "universals" (for instance in the art domain); even the moral sense. Ergo: there are innate responses: man is not devoid of a certain type of make-up at birth.

He, sort of, denounces the political appeal of a "blank slate" human being to justify the fears of inequalities and certain types of interventions. Those political fears are meant to be refuted. Thomas Jefferson meant "equality" of rights.

Nevertheless, he seems to be a bit cautious about Noam Chomsky's ideas of an "innate circuitry", or a universal grammar/plan. He points to the works of Jean Piaget and others, consisting of "personal ideas".

As for the fear of machines, thinking machines, running "amok", Pinker thinks it's a "waste of energy". I really don't agree. The singularity is at hand at any moment. We've witnessed one such an episode on Facebook*, quite recently.

Again, this is truly a case against empiricism, against those like John Stuart Mill and John Watson, who were proponents of a major role of experience in Psychology. The book of Pinker is a huge amalgamation of proof that psychopathology, personality traits, as well as love, consciousness and will, are biologically determined.

Well, I know Pinker is an atheist and a lover of the beauty of Darwin's theory of evolution. He's so hopeful regarding the completion of the Human Genome Project, one which may uncover the roots of the intellect and emotion.

I think a few years ago I've bought that Time magazine issue. So much so for a biological determinism, I wonder how would Pinker ~~deny~~ refute a God Gene? or a set of them?. It's, really, no monkey business. I'm not sure whether Pinker has read the book by Dean Hamer: The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes. Maybe some have it; maybe some don't.

I've got to grab that magazine again.

*<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonybrad...>

Interesting review here:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/20...>

Ian19 says

This book grew on me as I read it. At first, I suspected Pinker of cherry-picking targets from the extreme fringe of cultural constructivism. However, after I spent some time in a Sociology of Gender class at college, I discovered that the total denial of innate psychological programming is indeed as pervasive among the social sciences as Pinker suggests. His characterization of post-modernist philosophy, cultural anthropology, and some factions within psychology are very consistent with the ideas that I've seen professors advocate and students at my school endorse.

The Blank Slate is an important book for impressionable students of the social sciences because it thoroughly explicates arguments that some academic programs would never dare to teach. It's also a wonderfully engaging and thought-provoking intellectual history of how human nature has been conceptualized in different eras, and contains a spicy variety of compelling sociopolitical perspectives that will challenge liberals and conservatives alike.

Pinker is so smart and well read that he doesn't need to be mean, and he isn't. However, since he so thoroughly refutes so many positions that so many people hold so dear, he's inevitably going to be accused of being hostile, bitter, nasty, insensitive, and so on. That's what people do when someone proves them wrong.

Jenn Pellerin says

I'm an atheist. I've always been and always will be (god willing). When I was a kid, I used to envy the religious folks who seemed to be having such deep meaningful fun all the time. It's not that I hate religion, or the idea of god, it's just that I can't really get my mind around it after a childhood devoid of spirituality. Newsflash: if you don't take a lot for granted, religious theory makes NO SENSE. The only place I've ever found deeper meaning is in biology and physics and neurology. SO... reading this book is as close as I've come to a "religious experience". Reading about the evolution of the human mind, and how our basic drives--and the complex mechanisms we've developed to serve them--manifest themselves within culture, and simultaneously CREATE culture...it's just...positively uplifting. Thinking of human nature in this way makes me appreciate everything "human" in a much deeper sense. Music sounds better, machines are blowing my mind, babies are tiny geniuses! Hell, I may even read some poetry. How about THAT? I would recommend this book to everyone I know. It's just thick enough that some paragraphs warrant a second going over, but just engaging enough that it won't leave you frustrated and bored.

Lena says

The Blank Slate is Steven Pinker's ambitious attempt to close the gap between the conventionally accepted dogma that human beings come into this world free of innate characteristics, ready to be molded and shaped by society, and what science has begun to reveal about genetic predisposition.

Prior to reading this book, I had no idea that the origin of human nature was such a contentious topic amongst modern intellectuals. Seems that a lot of people think acknowledging that something like violence might have been evolutionarily adaptive is the same thing as condoning violence and excusing those who

engage in it, or that admitting that men and women are genetically different justifies discrimination against women. Pinker spends a lot of time in this book carefully addressing these concerns while at the same time making a compelling argument that the current tendency to deny any genetic influence on society's more vexing ills only handicaps our ability to successfully deal with our most serious problems.

Pinker is not shy about tackling controversial topics as he makes his points. The chapter in which he pointed to evidence showing that a child's intelligence and personality are shaped far more by genes, peers and random influences than they are by parents got him an enormous amount of mail, as did the section in which he discussed genetic influences on our appreciation of the arts.

Despite the radical nature of many of the theories Pinker presents, I found myself having continuous "ah-ha!" moments as I read this book. At its core, the idea that we are shaped by our genes as well as our experiences fits far better with reality than the idea that we are all nothing but moldable blank slates. Though these theories may not intellectually fashionable, Pinker makes it clear that there are a wealth of benefits to be gained by accepting what science has to tell us about the true origins of human nature.

David says

What an impressive book! I have been reading a number of Steven Pinker's books, and they are all excellent. I was particularly interested in how politics and social activists have worked to slow down the progress of science. The concept of a "blank slate", though socially attractive, has held back science and our understanding of human nature.

The chapter on children was especially interesting. Pinker rightly gives much credit to Judith Harris' excellent book *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. The subject is not finished, though. Pinker shows that while 50% of the variance in human nature is due to genetics, the remaining 50% of the variance is still in question. It is NOT correlated with home life or parental upbringing. It seems to be a combination of peer influences, and fickle fate.

Gendou says

Pinker argues cleanly and decisively against the theory of the Blank Slate (and its corollary, the Noble Savage). You might say he wipes the Blank Slate clean. Or that he breaks it over his knee.

He examines how motivations for wanting to believe in a Blank Slate come from four fears of human nature:

1. The Fear of Inequality: if people are innately different, oppression and discrimination (like sexism and racism) would be justified. But people are, in fact, different. Ignoring this fact doesn't help address the real cause of discrimination, which is to judge people as a member of their group, instead of as an individual. It also opens up rational arguments against discrimination to attack by any evidence against the blank slate.
2. The Fear of Imperfectibility: if people are innately immoral, hopes to improve the human condition would be futile. Ignoring human nature doesn't make people any less likely to commit crimes. When they do, it doesn't help us decide when and how harshly to punish them. Ignoring human nature is especially foolish in the case of rape. Denying that rape is a sexual crime, and insisting that it's only a violent crime (which it is, also) isn't going to deter any would-be rapists, who, as it happens, are motivated by sexual urges, not the

urge to commit violence.

3. The Fear of Determinism: if people are products of biology, free will would be a myth and we could no longer hold people responsible for their actions.

4. The Fear of Nihilism: if people are products of biology, life would have no higher meaning and purpose.

He attacks proponents of the Blank Slate like Stephen Jay Gould, parts of the political left, some feminists, etc.

He draws an important distinction between gender and equity feminism.

He draws an interesting distinction between the Utopian vs. Tragic vision, and how these influence political leanings.

He even calls out modern and post-modern art for their philosophical denial of human nature!

Brett Hilton says

Steven Pinker is an excellent writer, but I have major problems with this book. For starters, his main argument - that the blank slate hypothesis is untenable - is something of a straw man argument. How many people today actually believe that genes don't shape our brains, and thus our minds? I'm friends with many anthropology students who have read about the blank slate hypothesis, and their criticism of sociobiology is often directed at writers in the 19th century (and EO Wilson, who himself is prone to extensive oversimplification). Likewise, while Steven Pinker does an excellent job of ripping into those who would have us believe that the mind is completely shaped by the environment of that mind, I'm not sure who actually believes that anymore.

My second big problem is that Pinker sells an extreme form of evolutionary psychology that simply doesn't have evidence to back it up and is not the logical alternative to the blank slate. Perhaps one day when we can link particular conduits of genes to particular behaviors we can start inferring about how they arose, evolutionarily, in the first place. Right now, it's all speculation. The fact that evolution by natural selection is occurring and that this occurrence is on the genetic level does not mean that we have genetic evidence for whichever behavior Steven Pinker describes as adaptive, no matter how adaptive that behavior might seem.

Ultimately, these aren't scientific arguments, but science-y arguments. It's soft science. That doesn't mean this isn't an enjoyable book to read, though. It is. Pinker is a witty writer, to be sure, and I enjoyed reading this book. I would just recommend that readers take his claims with a grain of salt.

Tristan says

*"I'm only human
Of flesh and blood I'm made
Human
Born to make mistakes"*

--The Human League, Human

Most of us instinctively feel the acquisition of scientific knowledge follows a linear path, first operating from a solid factual base, and then modifying itself as it goes along in an objective fashion. Ultimately, a common agreeance on a certain topic will be reached, and the findings will translate into well-considered policy.

Ideally, that is how it *should* work, with scientists serving as neutral observers, freely informing us, the public, on whatever findings they come across, whatever the implications. This is not always what actually happens, of course. Not by a long shot. Ironically - also tellingly -, when it comes to the in-depth study of the human animal, there is active, hostile opprobrium by (a certain school of) social scientists and ideologically motivated activists alike. Scientists who try to find biological causations for certain human behaviours or perceived inequalities are frequently ostracised, pelted by slurs, and made pariah's in their own fields. The sober truth is that the scientific community is not free at all from anti-intellectualism and bullying tactics.

It seems nothing much has changed since the 2002 publication of this book, which I'm informed drew out considerable polemical discourse at the time. I'm not surprised. Anno 2016, the social sciences in Western academia are still infested with social constructivist thinking, with no sign of it abating any time soon. In fact, it might even have reached its zenith, having entrenched itself even further. It's not difficult to make an analogy with creationists. This exemplifies how far we still have to go as a species to attain a higher level of rational thinking, which means being willing to demolish some of our most cherished beliefs. Ego investment still is riding high, it seems.

Biological innateness. Determinism. These terms observably evoke unpleasant feelings in many. However, in order to come face to face with the homo sapiens which, during its brutal evolutionary process, has acquired certain survival - often nasty -instincts, one should let go of such reservations . Funnily enough, it was some of the most prominent Enlightenment thinkers (such as Rousseau) who introduced the blank slate theory. But are we blank slates, almost solely informed by the culture that surrounds us? Hardly, as Pinker shows us -with the aid of a plethora of immensely interesting case studies - in this intellectually dense, yet highly accessible book. Genes and our biological make-up determine our behaviour to a far greater extent than culture or our upbringing ever will. Pinker even goes as far as saying that parental influence on their child(ren)'s formation is pretty much negligible. Peer group interaction is a far more important determining factor.

However, Pinker deftly reasons that even with the ever-expanding, confronting knowledge of the human coming from the exciting fields of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, there is no need for us to defeatedly resort to fatalism or nihilism. On the contrary, an intimate, unsentimental understanding of what we are will help us enormously in developing a truly humanistic ethos and thus in crafting a pragmatic society which can be beneficial to all of us.

The utopian vision, with its aim to 'mould' the human psyche (social constructivism), the 20th century has adequately shown to only lead us into disaster.

David Redden says

The Blank Slate was an informative, thought-provoking and polemic book designed to refute ordinary conceptions and intellectual arguments which cut against a sociobiological understanding of humans and human society. I detected a couple instances in which the author, Stephen Pinker, overstated scientific conclusions, leading me to doubt the accuracy of his other scientific evidence. I also have reservations about the rational-actor lens through which he interprets human nature. On the other hand, the writing is good and many of his points are well taken. In sum, this book amounts to an interesting point of view that, while not entirely accurate, helps us see human society in a different light.

First the bad. In the couple areas of social science with which I'm somewhat familiar, he sometimes overstates the scientific research he uses as support. For instance, he briefly qualifies research suggesting inheritable differences between male and female brains but then proceeds to lay it all out as unqualified fact. All of this research was done on adults, which means that some of the differences *might* be hereditary, but this is far from established fact. The same charge has been laid against his sister Susan, which, interestingly enough, may support some of his other arguments about intra-family similarity in tendencies. His hypothesis about hereditary differences between male and female brains may in fact be true, and it definitely matches up with most peoples' intuitive observations of their own children. In any case I agree with him that it should make no difference when it comes to placing value on males or females, but none of this excuses the fact that he overstates the scientific conclusions.

In Chapter 12, Pinker similarly runs roughshod over stereotypical associations. He proclaims, “[P]eople’s ability to set aside stereotypes when judging an individual is accomplished by their conscious, deliberate reasoning.” While researchers have shown that thinking carefully about an individual's characteristics can dampen the effect of stereotypical associations, it doesn't reduce their effect to nil. In fact, subsequent studies suggest otherwise, because stereotypical associations effect more than just memory recall; they effect perception, interpretation and memory encoding. Academic social psychologists who profess otherwise are mostly legal defense experts and corporate human resource consultants. I doubt that Pinker cherry-picked or intentionally misrepresented the science, leaving me with the conclusion that he again overstated scientific conclusions.

As another minor but related point, Pinker might be misusing quotes, taking them out of context or reading too much into them. He quotes several intellectuals and researchers to prove that the philosophical ideas of “the blank slate” and “the noble savage” are broadly represented in academia. This may all be true, but after catching him overstating scientific conclusions I started to notice that many of these quotations could contain different, more nuanced meanings than Pinker squeezes out of them.

Pinker tips his hand most revealingly in Chapter 18, in which he writes, “In a cutthroat market, any company stupid enough to overlook qualified women or to overpay unqualified men would be driven out of business by a more meritocratic competitor.” This represents a brash oversimplification of history, cognitive science, social psychology; an underestimation of the influence of dumb luck; and an overestimation of humans’ ability to accurately evaluate the merits of other humans. It suggests that while Pinker’s erudition is broad, he makes up for its sometimes lack of depth by looking only as far as required to confirm his preconceived vision of rational actors in a rational society, which he in turn derives from the apparent rationality of evolution. The idea that we inexorably act rationally is not a necessary conclusion from our status as products of a mercilessly rational evolutionary process, but I understand how this can be a reassuring conclusion for people uncomfortable with ambiguity.

With all these faults, it’s still a compelling read. Pinker presents a great deal of fascinating and oddly intuitive scientific research in very accessible fashion. I’m satisfied by his assertion that we are creatures with inherited tendencies and skills, one of which is the ability to not allow our tendencies to rule tyrannically over us. He made me feel more confident and justified about my loose, respectful, loving relationship with my children, which others might see as too permissive for my children’s good. He carefully defines positions, quoting authorities from multiple disciplines to make his points, so he’s either very well read, has a number of well read research assistants, or perhaps both. His prose was confident like most polemics, but stops short of the patronization that ruins so many of the others.

Overall, The Blank Slate was entertaining, interesting, and informative, but I strongly recommend that you read it with both an open and critical mind.

Book says

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature by Steven Pinker

The Blank Slate is an ambitious book that goes after the blank slate fallacy that is the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be inscribed at will by society or ourselves. It's a social-biological study of nature versus nature. This excellent 528 page-book is composed of the following six parts: Part I. The Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine, Part II. Fear and Loathing, Part III. Human Nature with a Human Face, Part IV. Know Thyself, Part V. Hot Buttons, and Part VI. The Voice of the Species.

Positives:

1. Steven Pinker the well known Professor of Psychology at Harvard University writes thought-provoking, well-researched books and this book is no different.
2. Professor Pinker goes after the doctrines of the Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine and does so with gusto and a mountain of scientific evidence.
3. I'm glad someone finally refers to Social Darwinism to what it really is, "Social Spencerism".
4. The fallacy of behaviorists.
5. The theory of mind explained.
6. Great quotes with conviction. "The evidence is overwhelming that every aspect of our mental lives depends entirely on physiological events in the tissues of the brain".
7. The three great outrages of self-love.
8. How genes affect our behavior..."Small differences in the genes can lead to large differences in behavior".
9. Evolution is central to the understanding of life.
10. Culture defined.
11. Fascinating look at how our brains remain active during "assembly".
12. Evolutionary biology used to explain the complex cognitive and behavioral adaptations.
13. The attacks on "determinism" and "reductionism".
14. The religious opposition to evolution and its intended corruption of American science education.
15. The religious opposition to neuroscience. The exorcism of the human soul. I would love a whole book on just this topic!
16. The dangerous fallacy of equating evolutionary psychology with "Social Darwinism".
17. Debunking the four fears over the anxiety of human nature.
18. The fact that all species harbor genetic variability, but our species is among the less variable ones. Racial differences being among them.
19. The disposal of eugenics, discrimination, and Social Darwinism.
20. Many excellent messages throughout the book, "An idea is not false or evil because the Nazis misused it".
21. The fallacies of Nazism and Marxism. Nazism with races and the Marxists with classes.
22. Homosexuality in its proper form.
23. The importance of respecting women's fundamental rights to their bodies.
24. The compatibility of human nature with social and moral progress. Excellent!
25. The debunking of environmental determinism.
26. How our minds work.
27. The fallacy of the soul!
28. The co-evolution of intelligence and language.
29. The importance of our genes.
30. The ethics of autonomy, community and divinity explained.
31. Tragic Vision and Utopian outlooks.
32. Interesting take on the goals of the Constitution. How to anticipate and limit that corruption became an

obsession of the framers.

33. Interesting take on economics.

34. Fascinating look at the fallacy of the connection between media violence and violent behavior.

35. The logic of violence.

36. The understanding of true equality.

37. Gender under a true light.

38. The appalling notion that rape has nothing to do with rape. Thank you.

39. The three laws of behavioral genetics.

40. Many parenting myths debunked, bravo!

41. A good grasp of how the mind works is indispensable to the arts.

42. Great notes.

43. Extensive references.

Negatives:

1. Links did not work. A real crime for a book like this.

2. Not an even-handed approach. Mr. Pinker has his opinions and does not hesitate to use them. This could be considered a positive but it's not because the author does unleash ad hominem attacks to some of his opponents. For example, B.F. Skinner.

3. The book could be tedious to read at times.

4. It requires an investment of time. The book is too long.

5. A more comprehensive summary at end of each chapter would have been added value.

In summary, this is an important contribution to knowledge. This book is worthy of five stars just based on the wisdom you will obtain. Many important ideas and thoughts are found throughout this ambitious book. Such as, that new ideas from the sciences of human nature DO NOT undermine human values.

Further suggestions: "Human" by Michael S. Gazzaniga, "SuperSense" by Bruce M. Hood, "The Myth of Free Will" by Cris Evatt, "Hardwired Behavior" by Laurence Tancredi, "Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality" by Patricia S. Churchland, and "The Brain and the Meaning of Life" by Paul Thagard.

Nebuchadnezzar says

I contend that there are two Steven Pinkers. Pinker 1 is an eloquent, witty, and insightful writer on the issues of cognitive psychology and linguistics who has the rare talent of making his subjects accessible and appealing to academic and lay audiences. Pinker 2 retains the writing ability, but instead uses it for pushing his pet theories, usually political in nature (cf. his most recent *Better Angels of Our Nature*). This book comes straight from the pen of Pinker 2.

There are really two main components of the book: Lengthy rants against his ideological opponents and an extended argument in favor of a watered-down hereditarian view of human nature. Pinker rightly notes that "nature vs. nurture" is a false dichotomy and then goes about ascribing enormous amounts of deterministic power to genes. He relies on a number of controversial and dubious sources as well as his own misinterpretations of some research, such as Bouchard's infamous twin studies.

Lacking actual examples of those who hold this "blank slate" view, Pinker dredges up some long dead academics to serve as a scarecrow. He rails against J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner, even though his intellectual hero Noam Chomsky rebutted Skinner and behaviorism in general in the 1960s. Next he'll be telling us Lamarck was wrong about evolution! He also engages in some tired Margaret Mead-bashing

typical of sociobiology/evolutionary psychology partisans by citing Derek Freeman's "debunking" of Mead. Pinker missed the memo that Freeman's work was subsequently discredited (see Paul Shankman's *The Trashing of Margaret Mead*).

Pinker astutely points out that proponents of environmental or cultural determinism do not associate these theories with the horrors of communism (Lysenko famously denounced genetics as a "bourgeois pseudoscience"), but they do associate biological theories with eugenics and Nazism. However, in general, Pinker unleashes a firestorm on a field of straw men. Some of his more contemporary "blank slaters" are so-called "gender feminists," whatever those are. (Everyone except Christina Hoff Sommers?) Demonstrating that he's willing to slurp up just about any "finding" in pop evolutionary psychology, he offers an extended defense of Thornhill and Palmer's *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*. The defense parrots the authors' framing of the controversy, with Thornhill and Palmer as the hard-headed, rational scientists telling the cold hard truths versus the hordes of fluffy-headed, irrational, emotional, and "politically correct" feminists. Any mention of the scathing reviews the book met in the scientific press (see Cheryl Brown Travis's edited volume *Evolution, Gender, and Rape*) is omitted or given cursory treatment. Pinker uses pop evo psych in a number of other places as a means to club over the head the bogeywoman of gender feminism. This generally seems to involve projecting modern gender roles and stereotypes back into pre-history based on rank speculation. Simon Blackburn put it best: "Meet the Flintstones." (See, e.g., Cordelia Fine, Lise Eliot or Rebecca M. Jordan-Young for critical overviews of current sex-difference research.)

I could go on about the technical shortcomings in this book, but Blackburn and H. Allen Orr have already done a much better job of it in their reviews than I could:

<http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/~swb24/revi...>

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>

Pinker attempts to posture as a defender of science against the demons of unreason, but he is simply defending his own views and pet theories about science. He is pushing stealth hereditarianism under the banner of consilience, to borrow E.O. Wilson's term. "The blank slate" thus becomes an epithet to write off anyone who wants to say, "Hold on a moment, it's much more complicated than that!"

For those looking to get into evolutionary psychology: Skip this and pick up Laland and Brown's *Sense and Nonsense: Evolutionary Perspectives on Human Behaviour* for a scholarly overview of fields studying evolution and human behavior and Buller's *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature* for a critical view of evolutionary psychology.

For those looking to read Pinker: Skip this and pick up something by Pinker 1, like *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* or *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature*
