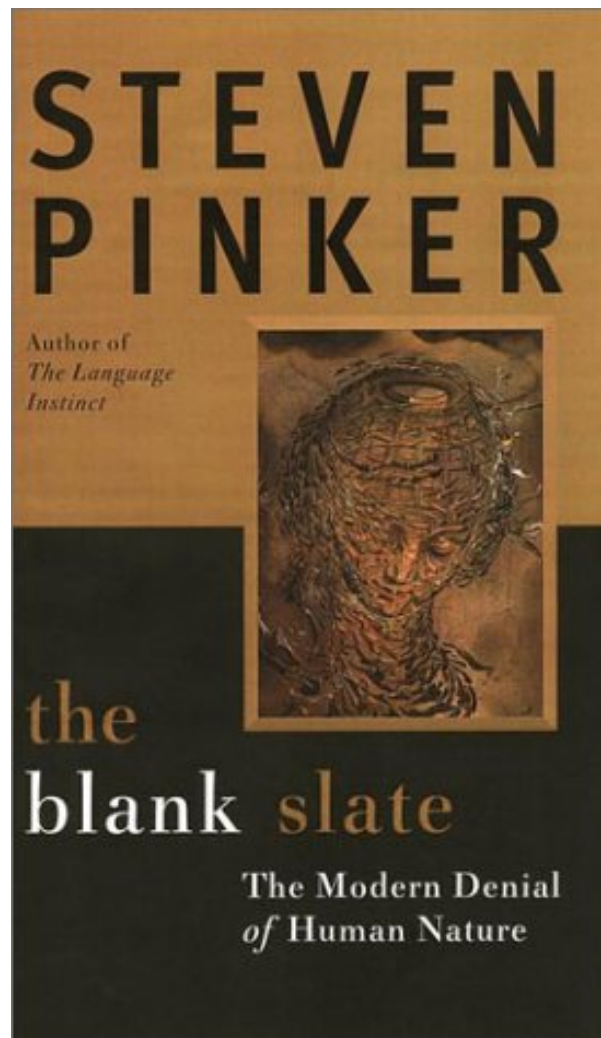


THE BLANK SLATE: THE MODERN DENIAL OF HUMAN NATURE BY STEVEN PINKER

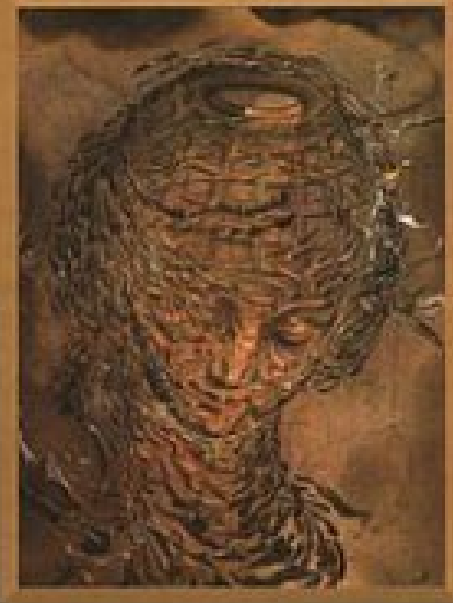


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STEVEN
PINKER

Author of
*The Language
Instinct*



the
blank slate

The Modern Denial
of Human Nature

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From Publishers Weekly

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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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Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Edifying, amusing, a must read.

By Peter Buxton

Mr Pinker does a great job destroying the tabula rasa and the Noble Savage, replacing them with biological Man, the only possible basis for Social Man. That said, Pinker refuses to explain much about Man's inner diversity, which is why this book has four stars and not five. I was amused at the unending lessons of conservative wisdom Pinker gets nailed by at all points in the text (my favorite? When the mob looted Montreal during a police strike, traumatizing young Master Pinker), each one matched and balanced by Pinker's often furious signalling of tribal loyalty to the Left.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Overwhelming!

By Peter Fish

I have to give this book five stars because it had an overwhelming impact on me, although I got a bit impatient with some of the repetitious polemic in support of his conclusions (and attacks on the conclusions of others).

Some things could have been stressed more than they were. Somewhere (I have the Kindle edition, which makes it hard to find stuff if you forget to highlight it) he lists some bullet points referring to traits of what he

calls intuitive responses that are part of our original nature, which are often at odds with the conditions imposed on us by the intricate culture we have evolved in the last 10-15,000 years. This implies that there are two distinct aspects of human evolution, 1) the slow process of animal evolution dating back several million years and proceeding one individual generation at a time (source of the intuitive traits) and 2) the express train (or rocket ship) of cultural evolution that began with the invention of language and agriculture (or, one could say, with the first syllogism). When we talk about human evolution, we tend to speak as if these were one and the same thing. This reminds me of the baseball story (famously applied to George W. Bush) about the man who was born on third base and thought he had hit a triple. Pinker's book is a major attempt to make these two processes distinct, but I think the message is obscured by the proliferation of arguments about side issues.

Also, in the chapter on gender, the discussion about rape and other forms of involuntary sexual activity passed over (without emphasis) a fact that I believe has great relevance here: humans are almost unique in mammal species in having concealed ovulation and in lacking any definite season of estrus, which seems of utmost significance with regard to sexual consent. Animals, by and large, don't have a rape problem, and don't need to deal with the 1001 issues of sexual relations that humans handle on a daily basis.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Nice treatment of the blank slate mythology

By Steven Peterson

Pinker takes on a perspective regarding human nature that tended to dominate the social sciences in the 20th century (with many adherents of the position still active now), namely that humans are "blank slates" and their life course is highly malleable. He says (Pages 2-3): "That theory of human nature--namely that it barely exists--is the topic of this book. . .Challenges to the doctrine from skeptics and scientists have pushed some believers into a crisis of faith and have led others to mount the kinds of bitter attacks ordinarily aimed at heretics and infidels."

The first part of the book examines the theory of "the blank state," the position that Pinker targets in much of the rest of the book. He notes some of the bitter academic politics going with the struggle over the question of the nature of human nature. Academics advocating the view that biology and evolution play a role in influencing human nature have often suffered at the hands of their critics (some egregious examples are included in the book). However, Pinker argues that we will develop a much richer understanding of humankind if we consider the variety of influences on human nature and move away from the sterile (my words, not his) blank slate metaphor.

Indeed, much of my academic research has focused on how an understanding of the life sciences can enrich our understanding of politics (I am a political scientist). An awareness of the neurosciences, evolutionary theory, genetics, and so on enrich our understanding of policy choices and our understanding of political behavior. Pinker, by addressing the myth of the blank slate, does a boon for those who have a richer, more integrated sense of human nature.

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