

No One at Home - What's New?

David Large reflects on the thoughts of Steven Pinker

There is no merit in replacing a mysterious non-physical or "spiritual" entity/thing/term with a mysterious physical entity/thing/term. If Plato didn't see this (and I think he did) then Aquinas certainly did. Today, however, we are in a real Dark Age. From the Middle Ages onwards to the seventeenth century, when people were put to death for heresy, Stephen Pinker would have been laughed at as a fool. Today, his cod-Cartesian materialist dogma is lapped up by an eager audience of the literate and the willing. How have we let this darkness descend on our time?

One truth that very few people are keen to publicise is that we don't even know what a gene is. When I say this people look at me as if I'm stupid. (I may well be stupid, but not about this). As John Dupre has pointed out, the concept of a gene as a 'particle' passing on a specific trait, which originates with the work of Mendel in the 19th century, is no longer useful and is deeply problematic in relation to current understanding. I would like to think that in evolutionary theory using the phrase 'gene for . . .' has a well-defined meaning tempered by the reality of what genes are, but when the term gets picked up and used by others then all bets are off and anything goes. Media stories about discovering 'the gay gene' and 'genes for violence' for example show how this language can lead even science savvy people to ludicrous arenas.

For Dupre there is really nothing very special about genes; they are ascribed an exaggerated uniqueness in evolutionary theory. So 'genes' becomes to be seen as a term like 'cells', not trivial but nothing like the universal explanation it is often taking to be. (Okay, not usually by scientists, but by psychologists, sociologists, journalists etc.)

As for what use explanations in terms of genes may be then one old chestnut is that they put pay to the tedious chicken and egg of the nature-nurture debate. Of course, this should be long buried as we have long recognised the part played by both. But, though this sounds good, I'd like to hear more - anything - about why the nature-nurture debate should be buried, what has replaced it as an analysis of what we are and why this is any better. It is no good simply citing people who say this, nod in agreement and then go on to produce totally different reasons why they believe it. For my money the nature/nurture distinction is very useful for starting debates. It is worse than useless for producing any worthwhile conclusion. That this is significant, if not worthwhile, in itself is often overlooked.

Steven Pinker's latest book, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, could easily be described as a philosophical travesty. The blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, of the title refers to the notion that our minds start out empty (of content) and are shaped entirely by our experience. Why on earth he thinks anyone still thinks this entirely escapes me. Anyway, the book is both an attack on this idea and an argument for a, shall we say, *alternative* view. Pinker, with stunning unoriginality (but, hey, let's not hold that against the guy) thinks that all humans are born with a common set of predispositions and abilities which come from our evolutionary past. Stop there. Let's ask: What are these? Where are they? Can I have surgery on them? Therapy? Can I do anything about this for me? For my children? These are what he describes as human nature. Well I don't know about you but it seems obvious to me that mere predispositions are a rotten description of human nature that begs more questions than it answers, unless of course you think that everything is a predisposition, in which case even God can't help us. I guess what I mean is, do you really think that Leonardo was predisposed

to paint the Mona Lisa and that Mona was predisposed to be painted by Leonardo and that this was because of something that happened in our evolutionary past? Boy, do you need help! Yes it really is true. Along with some other exponents of, excuse my French, Evolutionary Psychology, Pinker attempts to explain the roots of the behaviour of modern humans in terms of abilities that our ancestors of 100,000 years ago needed to survive. Why on earth do they do this? Why go back to no one knows where and no one knows when? Who had these ur-dispositions? Why them? Perhaps there's more than one. If it sounds like the (Inter)National Lottery to you then it certainly does to me. But hey, that's because we share the same dispositions from our evolutionary past. We can't test it, so we can't deny it! Amazing, give that man a huge publishing contract and file under Von Daniken. Or maybe it is because the theories of Evolutionary Psychology fall apart if tested on anything we have available to us.

Moving on, Pinker considers the blank slate model to be an extreme position. Like everybody else, Pinker thinks it is an incoherent idea; 'Blank slates don't do anything, whereas the human mind does many things.' He points to two examples; that we are all born with a natural ability to use language and that babies appear to have distinct preferences and characters from birth. Oh Steven, you do go on! If you really want to know about this stuff read and credit John Locke - Essay on Human Understanding 1658. John starts with the *tabula rasa*, goes through the various objections, far more thoroughly than Stevie-babes, and ends up saying nature and experience make a great team. Yes folks, this is very old hat.

So where are we? What are we? Pinker thinks we're a load of old predispositions in a deterministic system governed by chance. Jean-Paul Sartre come on down, we need your clear expositions! Whatever happened to me, to persons, to reasons and acting for reasons? And that's just for a start.

The truth is that all this was discussed in far more rigour and depth a long time ago, long before MIT and book tours and trendy meaningless neologisms. (Well maybe not before trendy meaningless neologisms.) If not Plato then Aristotle knew about these things in just the way Pinker approaches them, and I dare say others before them. They would say tell me what a gene is and how it changes my ideas. Tell me what a predisposition is and how everything else follows from that. To that Pinker offers no answers, just assertions.

So why do we scorn the likes of Locke, let alone the much maligned Descartes, if we bother with him at all, in favour of unthinking acceptance of paper thin so-called cognitive science that does not stand up to the slightest logical examination? Is it because we want to believe? Is it because we can't be bothered to do the work ourselves, and these giant foundations pay people to do it for us, irrespective of whether it is any good? Is it because people like Steven Pinker are presented to us as the last word on life the universe and everything? Well, as George Orwell, Jim Morrison and, more recently, John Searle would say "WAKE UP!"

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