

Of Course Someone's At Home - Grandma, the Wolf and a Boojum

A Reply to '*Someone's at Home - This is Good*' by Nikolas Lloyd

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First I'd like to thank Nikolas for making such a full reply. Perhaps he, and you the reader, will forgive me if I seem to have been a bit mean-spirited to Steven Pinker - at least he's had a go. Then again he is a great big Professor, in a huge University, with an absolutely massive amount of research, and fabulous databases at his disposal, who tours the world to great acclaim selling millions of books etc, etc, etc. I, in sharp contrast, am only a moderately paid charity sector worker with a couple of philosophy degrees and some Russian novels in translation.

For the sake of clarity I should point out that my piece was not, and was never meant to be, an academic paper, suitable for an academic journal. It was, however, aimed at a certain academic attitude that treats the latest ideas as the only ideas, and that steamrollers over the objections of non-academics, no matter how crazy these latest ideas may be.

While I don't believe Nikolas holds this attitude there are a lot of things in his paper that I just flat disagree with. Here I will address a couple of these issues before moving on to discuss a couple of Nikolas's points where I see some room for manoeuvre.

One thing I must insist on is that very intelligent people often do hold very stupid beliefs; or, to put it another way, being a very intelligent person doesn't stop you from saying and doing very stupid things. As my Grandma said to me, 'never listen to an expert off their subject'.

Another thing I insist on is that data is just data. It doesn't matter how much you have of it, it doesn't turn into something else or acquire new properties; it's still just data. No one should be impressed simply by the amount of data gathered nor by the number of citations listed. Size is not important.

Science, especially non-physical science, works by persuasion. It attempts to explain by description why a particular theory is a correct theory. It is no secret that in this way it is radically underdetermined. Like syntax and semantics, no matter how much evidential description is presented this alone can never constitute an explanation. There is a qualitative difference between the two.

With respect to others, the job of the scientist is to present, explain and persuade while all the time knowing that it just takes one piece of genuine disconfirming evidence, Popper's black swan, and the whole show is over¹. Pinker, to my mind, fails miserably to do this while remaining very popular. Richard Dawkins, memes excepted, seems to

do this very well while provoking ire and dislike. Daniel Dennett, a philosopher, seems to get things just rightⁱⁱ.

What I talked about before, but didn't say explicitly, was that I think Pinker's 'The Blank Slate' has good bits and bad bits. That said, the good bits are enormously derivative, and the bad bits are quite mad. Listening to, and reading about, Pinker discussing his book and his thoughts only reinforces this impression, hence the piece.

This doesn't mean that when Pinker debates with others he always loses. Indeed, to my mind, when in the company of other scientists and journalists he very often comes out on top. Does this mean that what I'm saying is that all scientists are mad but Pinker isn't quite as mad as the rest? No, at least that's not my belief. Does this mean then that while Pinker has read some philosophy the others have read none at all, and if only they all read lots of philosophy then everything would be all right? No; while that's closer to what I believe, it isn't what I'm saying either.

My position is much more like that of Dennett who says that the role of philosophers is to clarify and unify the sciencesⁱⁱⁱ. While I wholeheartedly subscribe to the clarificatory role of philosophy I'm not so sure that philosophers can, or should presume to, unify the sciences or anything else. On the other hand, there is a notion that once something is clarified it can be agreed and once everyone agrees about it, then it seems reasonable to say that it has been unified.

Looking at our debate about evolutionary psychology, one thing that just isn't clear to me is the enormous emphasis on our Stone Age ancestors. This approach seems to run on the worst sort of genetic determinism; roughly, once we find out, in space and time, where our genes came from then we can know what we are and why we are like we are, on the basis of what we were and what things were like when these genes came into being. Well surely, to give one example, this sort of argument would hold that anything with wheels is a standing stone transporter!

Worse, it invites the following sort of regression: To know about the Present Age look at the Stone Age. To know about the Stone Age look at the Mud Age. To know about the Mud Age look at the Amphibious Age, and so on. Philosophers would settle for this being an infinite regression and reject it as truly explanatory on that basis. Empirical scientists won't like this legerdemain so let's take it back to - To know about the creation of the Universe look at the Sub-Sub-Atomic Particle Age. This Age may only last a million-billionth of a second but bear in mind that this was all the time in the world. And then of course, the bell tolls, or clangs rather – This is just what physicalist, materialist, empiricist scientists do!^{iv} But, with regard to human nature etc, this isn't any sort of explanation at all.

So it looks like, either way, evolutionary psychologists are hoist on their own petard. They have here either an infinite regress, or they end up trying to explain behaviour in terms of something ludicrously quantitatively remote and qualitatively distinct, or both.

And then you see what happens when philosophers play Dennett's clarificatory role.

The people you're trying to help, the scientists and psychologists, feel insulted, take umbrage, and choose to ignore philosophers and their presumptuous ilk. Once this has happened just about the best you can hope for is books like the Blank Slate! As my Grandma said to me, 'no good turn goes unpunished'.

Now, in their discussions of human nature, freewill etc philosophers often bring into play the notion of the person. In particular, it seems useful to introduce the notion of the person to help find a way out of the maze of genetic reductionism, including questions about 'genes for' and determinism.

From what Nikolas has written I'm not sure that he has understood 'person' to be the loaded philosopher's term of art that it is. What the notion of person is certainly not is the commonplace usage meaning roughly 'you there' nor is it in any way a noun for a strictly defined object to be treated by the methods of empirical science.

The notion of a person says something like when something is in such a position within a society, a culture, an economy, a political system, a discourse, a set of facilities, and, yes, a certain maturity, then there arise certain considerations for that something. These considerations involve rights, responsibilities, freedoms, sensibilities, aesthetics, political inclinations, and, yes, material and intellectual resources. It is these considerations that go towards making up dispositions and choices for that person.

Simply looking at the physical and genetic make up misses all this out. If you choose to ignore this situation, if you choose to dismiss these considerations, or replace them with something else, then you throw the baby out with the bath water. On this view, human nature and dispositions do not reduce below the level of the person.

No one is saying that you have to accept this view. What I am saying is that if you want to reduce things below this level you have to a) come up with some reasons and arguments for what you are doing and b) show why this, the generally accepted view, is wrong. It seems to me that neither Pinker nor Nikolas have done this.

The news that many empirical scientists deny that there is such a thing as human nature is truly alarming indeed. I have given above one argument why this may be. Put simply, whether they know it or not, human nature is not something that falls within the scope of their enquiry^v. Bear in mind that there's nothing to stop very clever people saying very stupid things. Okay so Pinker wants to argue against these people – Yes, this is good news. It may go a long way to explaining why when I hear Pinker debating with such people I find his comments comparatively reasonable and sane. It is how Pinker presents his own views and his arguments for these views that is the problem. And, Nikolas, telling me that things are worse than I thought doesn't make things better either!

What Pinker does is assume that the person-centred view is wrong, a non-starter, and talks about the sorts of things he thinks are right. In doing this he does more than many others but nevertheless walks straight into a whole set of long discussed philosophical arguments which, I am sorry to say, he appears to be woefully equipped to deal with.

Now, okay, it's his book. He can say what he likes, how he likes, and maybe he doesn't want to write a philosophy book. Nevertheless, it would be nice to see these longstanding positions acknowledged. If he then wishes to dismiss them out of hand then that's up to him. It seems that Nikolas is in a very similar position.

Further, it is not sufficient to say that Pinker's books are popular works, as if the real arguments are to be found elsewhere. That they are positioned in the popular genre of course means they are fair game for journalists and commentators. And if these journalists and commentators take up stupid positions then who is to blame - the journalists and commentators for reading and remembering what the books say, or the author, whoever they may be, for withholding the true, sensible, positions?

Having said all that, let me make it clear that I have no personal animus toward Professor Pinker. Indeed, earlier this year, I very much enjoyed listening to him and his musical selections on Radio 3's Private Passions: Oliver Nelson – Now, Steven, you're talkin'!

ⁱ This may, of course, be the cue for a new show to begin.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, his *Freedom Evolves*, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ I'm not sure how much of a philosopher Dennett really is these days, but that's another story.

^{iv} I'm not trying to foist an unsuitable name on anyone here. Please feel free to pick your own.

^v This by their definition of their enquiry.