

Someone's at Home - This is Good

Nikolas Lloyd replies to David Large

David Large asserts that we do not know what a gene is, and in this manner seeks to write off what the likes of Pinker are saying as bunk. While it is true that many ignorant and unprincipled journalists are guilty of using phrases such as “the gene for” in a sloppy and misleading manner, this criticism is not fairly aimed at Pinker. Although David Large does not say this implicitly, he very strongly implies that Prof. Pinker is committing the same error that the journalists are. This is the reverse of the truth. Writers trying to explain to the public the tremendous advances in evolutionary psychology commonly plunge their heads into their hands in near despair when yet another journalist gets it wrong. Pinker is innocent.

As science advances, we learn more and more. No scientist is stupid enough to say that we know everything, but this does not make it true that we know *nothing*. We know a great deal about genes, and are finding out more all the time. We know their chemical formulae, we know the structure of them right down to the individual molecules. We know about meiosis and chromosomes, and this knowledge explains a wealth of observations. We know that people with Down's Syndrome have an extra chromosome. It is now, one would have thought, impossible to argue that the characteristics of Down's Syndrome could be put down to upbringing or trauma in the womb, as they have been in the past. Similarly, we have found individual genes which are predictors of certain diseases with 100% accuracy. If a person inherits the gene, he inherits the disease. The purpose of the gene is not to create the disease, genes do not have *purposes*, they are just unthinking lumps of chemical, but they do have repeatedly demonstrable effects. It is not unreasonable, sometimes, to write “the gene for” assuming a level of understanding in the reader.

Two men walk to a door, both wanting to go through it. On the far side of the door, a broom has fallen against the door, and become propped up against it. The conversation goes as follows:

Clive: Right, well, we'll just go through here and [pushes at door]. Oh, that's strange: it's stuck.

Brian: Try pushing harder.

Clive: [Pushes harder, but the door doesn't open] No, no good. I don't think it likes me. It just doesn't want to open for some reason.

Brian: Actually, you are operating under a fallacy. You presuppose that the door has intentions and perceptions. Your saying, “I don't think it likes me” makes it clear that you believe that the door is aware that you exist, and has a set of emotional and rational organs rendering it capable of deciding or feeling that it likes you. Similarly, your saying, “It just doesn't want to open for some reason” suggests wrongly that the door has plans for the future, and has reasons for a certain line of policy. In fact the door is a large artefact composed of dead wood, paint, and brass fittings. It has no perceptions, feelings, or intentions. It is an inanimate and non-sentient object. I therefore suggest that you revise your beliefs so that you are more able to form an effective strategy based on fact that will enable you to open the door.

Clive: Thank you for saying that. It was tremendously helpful. Please hand me that crowbar.

Was Brian actually helpful? Was he instead an irritating git? When Clive said, “It just doesn't want to open” he was presupposing not that the door had conscious intentions, but that the person he was speaking to would understand what he meant, and not prove himself to be

tiresome and pedantic. Sometimes, when someone writes, "the gene for," they do so presupposing that the reader will be able to understand what he means by this. Unfortunately, this means that it is possible for the Brians of this world to exploit the confusion many people have over genes, and to put forward the same daft argument that Brian did about the door. All this does is further confuse people who don't understand about genes, and irritate those who do. Actually, there is another effect: it potentially raises the status of the Brian in the eyes of the ignorant.

We know a lot about genes. Genes are being found that have strong associations with human traits. We do not necessarily know exactly how a gene does what it does, nor what the full effects are, but we are able to use a vast database to show convincingly that genes affect and effect human behaviour.

David writes about Nature and Nurture that, "we have long recognised the part played by both." Steven Pinker's point is that this is far from true. Many people have and still do deny that there is such a thing as human nature. Pinker is not so stupid as to suggest that genes and genes alone account for all of human behaviour. He has never said or written this, nor have any evolutionary psychologists done so. No one is that stupid. Instead, he is defending a very reasonable and moderate standpoint: that genes have a significant role in human behaviour, and he is defending this against a bizarre and extremist one: that genes have no role in human behaviour. The general public knows that what Pinker believes is right. Anyone normal person who has had any experience of dealing with human beings knows this. It takes an intellectual to deny it.

I have attended many nature/nurture debates, and they bore me. This debate proves over and over again a useless and frustrating starting point for serious and productive debate. Two camps always quickly emerge. One is scientific and moderate, using facts to back up arguments, and the other is political and extremist, and believes that its opposition is made up of evil people. The latter goes to tremendous lengths to misunderstand everything that the former says, and the result is confusion and entrenchment. Steven Pinker's book is something that the public might read alone, and come to its own conclusions. Naturally some people will misinterpret it. No matter how simple a message is, people will choose to misinterpret it for their own ends. Many Christians have disagreed on the meaning of "Thou shalt not kill."

David Large sees no reason for Pinker's assertion that there are people who deny human nature. This is strange, given how many and how loud these people are. I have witnessed well-educated people denying human nature in public debates on more occasions than I can count, and Pinker's book gives plenty of examples. David also criticises Pinker for unoriginality. Pinker is not claiming originality of this idea. He is writing a book to inform and entertain the public, and he is very good at this. The point isn't whether he is original or not, but whether or not he is *right*.

Quoting again from David Large: "Pinker. thinks that all humans are born with a common set of predispositions and abilities which come from our evolutionary past." Yes, that is right, Pinker does think that, as do many others, including me. This sentence implies that Pinker is wrong. It also contradicts Large's own point that surely there are no people who would think otherwise. Large himself does, it seems. Large then asks, "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?" The implication of these words seems to be that Large thinks that this idea is useless. No idea based on truth is useless. If the truth is that human nature is indeed based on our evolutionary past, then this is the one and only thing on which to base our efforts to answering the questions.

Large writes, "Well I don't know about you but it seems obvious to me that mere predispositions are a rotten description of human nature." Rotten? Why? It is not obvious to me. Rotten because this is not the way he would prefer the world to be? If so, tough - Large will have to get used to it, and should not criticise scientists for preferring truth to a more cosy set of wrong ideas. Rotten because it is wrong? If so, it is up to Large to show how it is wrong. Rotten because it is not clear? It seems very clear to me that I was born with innate predispositions and abilities. I can see through my eyes very well, but I have no memory of ever having been to classes in which I was taught to use my eyes. The skill came quite naturally. Evolutionary psychology explains such abilities, and it explains why men are more interested in World War Two, while women are more interested in childcare. Any theory that can explain a great deal is a good one, and evolutionary psychology offers good explanations for the entirety of human behaviour. I'd say that that is quite a lot.

Large: "do you really think that Leonardo was predisposed to paint the Mona Lisa. and that this was because of something that happened in our evolutionary past? Boy, do you need help!" The question is asked in a way that implies that only a fool would think such a thing. In truth, many very intelligent people think precisely this. The world is a very big and complicated place. It is so complicated that no one could possibly have analysed the genes of Leonardo's parents and by this predicted the Mona Lisa. However, it is true that Leonardo did inherit genes, and these caused him to grow fingers that could hold a brush, and a brain that could use his eyes. Furthermore, it gave him a character that made him inquisitive and creative. He was born into a world that had patrons of art in it, had a need to make a living in it, and had the model for the painting in it. Put these things together and you get the potential for the Mona Lisa.

"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?" asks Large. I'll answer him. Evolutionary psychologists go back many thousands of years because that is when human nature evolved. Evolution is slow, and works by a process known as natural selection. Therefore, in order to study human nature's evolution, we have to consider the environment in which it evolved: that of stone age hunter-gatherers. This is very simple to understand and definitely necessary. Thanks to archaeological evidence, the study of modern hunter-gatherers, as well as the study of our own bodies we know that humans evolved as hunter-gatherers. It would be a very unusual person who would suggest that we evolved from some other sort of subsistence. What could that be? Farming? What would have preceded farming? The people who had these predispositions were our ancestors, and we get our genes from them. The question "why them" is a daft one. There needn't be a reason. The people who passed their genes on to us were the people who passed their genes on to us. That is it - there is no reason. Some people in the past were different from us, and they didn't pass on their genes to us, and that is why we are different. Large asks his questions as though they are difficult to answer. They are not. They are very simple to answer.

"We can't test it, so we can't deny it! Or maybe it is because the theories of Evolutionary Psychology fall apart if tested on anything we have available to us" writes Large. This is a very strange thing to write, given how very thoroughly testable evolutionary psychology is, and how much it has been tested. We have fabulously huge databases to work from. We have the whole of animal behaviour, the whole of human behaviour, the whole of history, the whole of archaeology, and quite a lot of palaeontology as well. Many experiments have tested the theory. People have tried bringing up baby chimps among humans, and humans in the company of chimps. People have studied a myriad of times the mental differences between men and women, and have come up with consistent results showing that the differences are

real and innate. Experiments have shown that the degree of relatedness between humans correlates excellently with the behaviour of those humans. Studies of twins have famously shown how astonishingly similar these people are, even when reared apart. What is more, all of these results just happen to match perfectly the predictions of evolutionary psychology. To say that evolutionary psychology is not testable is just plain wrong.

Large says that we should instead read the works of John Locke in 1658. This is strange because Large says that Locke came to the same conclusions as Pinker, but if Pinker is wrong, why recommend Locke? Also, Pinker has the massive advantage of all the latest understanding and data. Locke didn't know about DNA, nor had he run tens of thousands of words used in lonely-hearts adverts through a computer to study human mating patterns.

In his opening paragraph, Large uses the term "cod-Cartesian materialist dogma," which I find a little inconsistent with his scolding Pinker for his "trendy meaningless neologisms." He ends writing, "Whatever happened to me, to persons, to reasons and acting for reasons? And that's just for a start." Well, again this is easy to deal with. Despite Pinker's book, you still exist, and so do other people. There is nothing in evolutionary psychology that suggests otherwise. I am an individual. I have inherited a unique set of genes and a unique environment. I have a brain with the ability to reason and to spot that Large's arguments are flawed. I have my ancestors to thank for that. I have also inherited some instincts, honed by my upbringing, that spur me to write this essay. I might raise my status by writing this, and I have instincts that encourage me to seek status. I like to practice the art of putting forth an argument, and my instincts encourage me to practice such things, because one day they may help me pass on genes. I was asked to write a reply to David Large's essay and I have inherited instincts to grant such requests, because my ancestors who helped others did better than those who didn't. Not only do I have reasons to write this essay (status, fun, challenge, helpfulness etc.), but also I have a deeper understanding of my reasons thanks to evolutionary psychology.

Nikolas Lloyd, January 2003

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