

Steven Pinker. The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature. Viking. 2002.

As can be seen the book is rather old and is not about, but instead of concern for, psychoanalysis as can be seen below. I wrote a thorough presentation and critique of the book when it last year appeared in Swedish translation. Forum's editors thought that a critical review could be interesting for its readers. For bibliography I refer to my home-page: [lennartramberg.praktikertjanst.se](http://lennartramberg.praktikertjanst.se).

### **Introduction**

Steven Pinker is a professor in cognitive psychology at Harvard University, U.S.A. and has published many influential books such as The Language Instinct and How the Mind Works.

This book is written from the perspective of the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher's Thomas Hobbe's Tragic Vision of Man:

By nature of his instincts for self-preservation man is bound to be ruthlessly competitive.

This leads to a life in violence and suspicion and eventually to the self destruction of the race and, would we say today, to our planet as well. Therefore there is an absolute need for a strong state governed by a strong and punishing leader, a godlike Leviathan.

We are existentially destined to be lonely, alternating between aggressiveness and the feeling of terror and persecution – In the tradition of psychoanalysis we can see this worldview mirrored especially in late Freud, to whom the author pays some respect, in Klein's schizo-paranoid position and in Peter Fonagy's (ref. to Richard Alexander, 1989) evolutionary perspective on the development of our capacity for mentalisation.

### **Obsolete dogmas**

Pinker states that humanistic and psychological research the last century shunned the results of genetic research and instead blindly adhered to three dogmas, or meta-theories.

1. We are born as blank slates upon which our environment imprints itself without any inborn tendency to select behaviour from the perspective of values.

John Locke's concept of a tabula rasa, which he used in order to show that the feudalistic state and its hierarchy was not by God given, was in the last century used to advocate totalitarian solutions for a New Beginning as in the Third Reich in the form of Hitlerjugend, the former communistic state's attempts at creating new minds as in Mao's cultural revolution.

2. There is a Mind – Brain-body dualism. It is a continuation of the Gnostic idea that the soul enters the body at birth and flies away when our bodies disintegrate. The idea reached a scientific respectability through Descartes, when (as a saving clause for an accusation of heresy?) he postulated the existence of a "ghost in the machine". This dualism has stood in the way for a lot of important research and has since two millena worked as an alibi to see our Instincts/Triebe as shameful and denied, instead of, as Freud, trying to find a theory and method to integrate them with our conscious selves.

3. Man is by nature a noble savage when untainted by Society - A romantic stance which we can see a reflection of in simplified clinical theories as in Arthur Janov's primal therapy in its original version.

Pinker shows research that implies all these doctrines to be obsolete. Instead he insists on that we face our genetic heritage and take it much more into consideration when building our society.

He describes results from research in cognitive science, in its broadest sense, using information- and chaos-theory to explore the redundant processes in the brain, which makes the workings of the mind understandable and the existence of an inner world and other human characteristics, such as consciousness, possible. All these processes, he says, develops out of structures that are genetically predetermined and therefore inborn.

To integrate the behavioural sciences built on genetics with cognitive theory into an Evolutionary Psychology seems to be one core mission for Pinker in this book, and in that process let go of the notion of socio-biology with its connotation of reductive biologism, racism etc.

A more outspoken mission is to prescribe ways to govern our society on – what he considers – a scientific ground. In that sense the book is a modern Moral Essay on Society following the tradition of Hobbes and others.

### **An intuitive sense of reality and values based on an intuitive psychology**

In short Pinker writes that as humans we have a genetic composition already in existence from ancestral times, when we lived on the savannas in Africa. In those early times we built in a series of ways of coding our relation to its environment in the form of a genetic disposition. From that follows (sic!) that our psyche has the same basic characteristics as in those times, i.e. we basically have the same intuition of our world as then. The fact that we live in other cultures doesn't change that fact.

1. Without reflecting we differentiate between living matter and dead. We intuit that living creatures harbours an essence which endows them with the power of will. Further: many of us intuitively know that all humans have a soul which gives us consciousness with thoughts and desires and also, the capacity to choose, if we will act upon them.

2. We have an aptitude for life in small groups to which members we feel affiliated and attach ourselves. We try to do our best for the group and defend it against (what we consider to be) enemies. As well as

our natural tendency for love, friendship and loyalty to the group, we have an inborn intuitive feeling for when assaults and injustices have been done to ourselves or to somebody in the group. With the same sense of conviction, he says, we demand a righteous punishment to be executed (including capital sentence).

3. We have an intrinsic feeling for economic realities in the form of simple visible exchange.

This biologically based intuitive psychology of ours decides what is genuine and true. This way of intuiting instead of understanding, communing and relating through sign instead of communicating is not adapted to modern life. We live in cities in highly differentiated societies with complex hierarchies and most of our extra-familial transactions take place in a non visible context. We all live with technological solutions we don't understand the workings of etc.

Therefore we have created more or less rational rules to live by and they don't come to us naturally.

They have to be taught. This is of special importance in our education of children and young people. We have to teach them the way and the rules how to live in the society they were born into, since they don't have an intuitive understanding of, and therefore cannot empathise with, them. This is of course also often true for many adults who don't empathise with all the rules and the values they are based on and consequently cannot convey them to their offspring; a fact having to be considered.

Pinker argues that we must build our society based on the knowledge we have of the human mind and its development. We must use our critical, rational capacity for thought in order to change belief-systems, values and non-functional rules and in that process respect both our innate nature and the needs of our society.

### **The importance of peers**

Pinker presents some very interesting, mainly statistical, research on twins and their parents. It shows that around half of the twins' characteristics are genetically inherited, while the other half is acquired. *But not from the parents (!)* as psychoanalytic (except maybe for Sullivan) and psychodynamic theory postulates, but from outside the family (Judith Rich Harris)! From these data and other research he proposes that our acquired psychological characteristics derive from our peers and other extra-familial relations and situations. He expects children of families with severe traumatic background.

### **Some critical comments**

1. Genes aren't all. Human culture is a niche in Darwin's sense, even if virtual and not geographical. Pinker shows that the brain is well pre-programmed for its future use – an interesting section in the book. According to him many readers believe that with the notion 'the brain's plasticity' is meant that the environment can even change its functional structure. In the same section, though, he without further ado waves aside serious researcher's thoughtful reasoning on the brain's and mind's development, but still lists them in his bibliography! Many of them have come to radically different scientific conclusions than those of Pinker's and would, I guess, consequently be sceptical, or outright negative, to his solutions on the problems in American society.

In our times, when we go on GI- or stone-age-diets with so good results, we can find it easy to accept the thought that we all are people from the savannah; that we have a genetic setup some hundred thousand years old and a brain that has had the same weight and surface anatomy the last 40.000 years. Not much can have happened to human nature since then. Pinker's thesis must be right!

But then we forget that we since long live in societies with increasingly more complex cultures. Those societies in themselves are to be seen as niches in the Darwinian sense, even if they are time-bound, and therefore often virtual, and not geographic. Seen in that perspective we can infer a both linear and stochastic sequence of changes in the brain, following alongside with the cultural development, something we can infer from the use of better tools and weapons, and the gradual evolution of language. *Changes in culture take place much more often than in genes. Valuable ideas and technologies spread much more effective and therefore faster than genes.*

Pinker seems to belong to the reductive fundamentalists within evolutionary psychology, in the sense that he uses *one* leading principle to explain very complicated phenomenon – He considers himself to be a hierarchical reductionist since he tries to integrate different fields of knowledge into one synthesis.

According to me he is monotonously inductive and flat (compare for Ken Wilber's 'Flatland') when he as soon as he describes a human quality postulates that the gene was selected from the gene-pool of hunters and collectors from time immemorial and quickly finds a reason why.

I recommend Terrence Deacon's (1997) book *The Symbolic Species* as an antidote to this book both with reference to its psychological complexity, its reasoning on the evolution of the brain, and for his "nonseductive" style of writing.

2. On the interlacing of genetic heritage and environment

Gerald Edelman's (1987, 2000) groundbreaking work on the development and function of the brain, and his hypothesis of neuro-Darwinism, shows how intricately the activity of genes and the milieu, "nature-nurture", unconditionally and seamlessly are intertwined with each other. Clearly the brain develops according to a certain pattern, as Pinker says, but every change, even a minimal, of the internal milieu will result in new and idiosyncratic links between neurons, which in turn leads to other developments etc. Every individual has a unique brain with no pre-determined connection between neurons (Howard

Shevrin). We also know that the child with its brain needs to be in a *qualitatively unique* dialogue with mother or another adult in order to develop optimally. Read Allan Schore's (1994, 2003) books!

3. Pinker makes a cognitive jump between his instinctual biology and the capacity to make rationally founded judgements. In the psychoanalytic/psychodynamic domain we deal with a complex and multidimensional continuity and discontinuity in between those vertices. *Pinker has not developed a theory of motivations and emotions into an organically integrated affect-cognitive theory.* Affect-theory is just named on some page. How emotions, early and later developed cognition are integrated with motives/drives into attributive primary process- and later relational secondary process-symbolism, which in turn develops into a multilayered symbolising self – certainly man's most distinguishing feature – is ignored. Not to have developed such an (epigenetic) developmental sketch of man's psyche/mind is a lack, since the want of that link makes his theory of human nature less convincing.

I guess he is right, though, when he writes that the theory of cognitive connectionism needs to be linked to man's primitive motives and emotions to become a valid theory.

4. In his polemics directed against leftwing radicals, radical feminists, supposedly utopian psychoanalysts and psychotherapists and researchers he (approximately) refers to Marx and Freud only, therewith neglecting the theoretical and clinical development within these traditions during the last one hundred years!

5. I am positive that he overstates the human tendency for egocentric values, competition and violent aggression by comparison with our tendency to form relational values and to make affiliating bonds to groups outside our own group. Pinker seems to agree more with Freud's later views on human life than the view that later evolved in the psychoanalytic tradition in the form of object relations- and inter-subjective theory.

#### **The risk of sanctioning a positivistic medical paradigm**

Pinker doesn't give support for any form of psychotherapy aiming at changing the inner world – his view of the latter is very static and simple. *His theory of an intuitive psychology, though, may for some supply the need for a depth-psychology in cognitive theory.* He gives implicit support for supportive and behaviour oriented psychotherapies' power to somewhat influence, or even curb, the expression of our intuitive psychology.

The book has received an enthusiastic and uncritical reception in Sweden as well as in other countries – according to reviews I have read - from within influential circles of academic research in psychology and neuro-science, which sciences are built upon a positivistic paradigm. The same is true for the socio-medical system at large, which relies on evidence based research, and for the so called interested layman. I think this is due to Pinker's simplified, (hierarchical) reductionistic and objectifying reasoning, which makes the book easily accessible. His fresh, often polemic and somewhat seductive style of writing and an imposing list of bibliography bring about an air of truth to his presentation. This is problematic since *his findings and opinions are often very controversial and opinions contrary to his are often not properly presented in the book.*

Certainly a scientifically based evolutionary view on man's psychology is needed, but not one like this which is fundamentally built upon the same premises as socio-biology, a concept which Pinker wants to replace, and upon positivistic science.

In times like this when personally confiding and involving therapies like psychoanalysis and psychodynamic oriented psychotherapies find little support from health maintenance organisations, it is important to know the following: Their effectiveness, which nowadays almost entirely is rated upon evidence research, has not been shown. Psychotherapy, though, is better described through the use of a contextual model (Frank and Frank) than through a medical. By using a contextual meta-theory one (e.g. Wampold) has found compelling data for its effectiveness. Moreover it was found that the methods as such are not that important, but that factors like allegiance – that both therapist and client believe in the method – a good working alliance and the personality of the therapist are more important for the result. These findings don't go well together with an approach to understand human nature like Pinker's objectifying reductionism but call for a more complex evolutionary theory, in which the subject and his environment co-evolve.

Therefore there is room for a person, familiar in depth psychology and psychotherapy, to write a moral essay from a more or less scientific ground, prescribing how to govern a state, following the example of 17<sup>th</sup> century Hobbes and Pinker - a marker of our times - if he is brave, or foolhardy, enough to take up that challenge.