

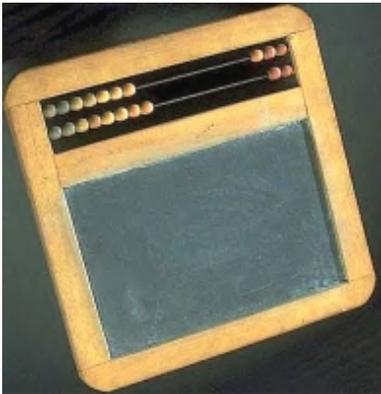
The New Science of Man

Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Viking, 2002, 528 pp., \$27.95.

The struggle between biology and liberalism.

reviewed by Samuel Francis

In the recent film thriller *Red Dragon*, actor Ralph Fiennes plays a serial killer whose psychopathic urge to commit murder is the product of his upbringing by an abusive grandmother. Unfortunately for the producers, the film and the book on which it is based were written and produced before the appearance of Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*,



What liberals wish we were.

one of the targets of which is the notion that social environment causes criminal behavior. The broader target Prof. Pinker's book seeks to demolish is the closely related idea that human beings have no inherent nature but are merely empty vessels into which the "culture," the "social environment," the "class structure," "history," or some other abstraction may pour whatever fluids it wills. Prof. Pinker, a world-renowned linguist at M.I.T. and the author of several earlier books arguing similar positions, is well-suited to this work of demolition, and on the whole he succeeds.

Obviously, the "blank slate" is merely one more metaphor for the "empty vessel," but whatever the metaphor, it is an idea that denies the meaning and importance, if not the very existence, of race, and the denial of race has been one of the principal uses to which the blank slate doctrine has been applied in the last century. The phrase itself comes from the 17th century English philosopher John Locke, whose treatise on psychol-

ogy described human nature as a "*tabula rasa*," an "empty tablet," that merely receives sense impressions and is the product of those impressions. Locke was also a major architect of modern liberalism, and the blank slate theory in one form or another underlies much of modern liberal thought. In the 20th century the same idea was embraced not only by Marxists, whose application of it to human beings produced much of the chaos and tyranny associated with modern communism, but also by Western liberals—John Dewey, John B. Watson and the "behaviorist" school of psychology that he founded—and, perhaps most notably, by Franz Boas and the school of anthropology he and his disciples imposed throughout American universities until recently.

It was in the Boasian school of anthropology that the blank slate denial of human nature was most influential, and it reached what was perhaps its *reductio ad absurdum* (in American academic quarters, at any rate) in the concoctions of Boas's student, Margaret Mead, about the sex lives of Samoans. Despite their transparent absurdity, both the blank slate theory and its bizarre applications in scholarship and thought have been taken seriously by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and most other academics, as well as journalists, creative writers, and even by Hollywood, whence they have come to infect the minds of otherwise sensible people who are not professional intellectuals. Politically, much of what the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the Great Society did or tried to do was justified in terms of blank slate doctrine. In the Soviet Union, not only the forced redistribution of property and the attempt to abolish class and other forms of social hierarchy but also the disastrous dogmas of "Lysenkoism" were applications of blank slate theory.

Prof. Pinker argues that the blank slate concept is closely related to two other ideas with which he takes issue: the idea of the "Noble Savage" (essentially, that human beings are naturally good or peaceful, non-dominating, non-aggressive, and non-acquisitive) and the idea of the "Ghost in the Machine" (essentially, that a non-material mind exists

distinct from the material body), a concept he firmly rejects. Margaret Mead's depiction of cute and harmless little Samoans copulating with no guilt, fear, or jealousy is one of the better-known examples of the former concept, which she managed to combine with the blank slate doctrine she picked up from her mentor Boas.

Prof. Pinker slaughters the noble savage mythology with little trouble. "As the anthropologist Derek Freeman later [after Mead] documented," he writes, "Samoans may beat or kill their daughters if they are not virgins on their wedding night, a young man who cannot woo

Not only aggression and sexual differences but also intelligence he acknowledges to be in large part genetically grounded, but on the Big Taboo—race—he is vague and even contradictory.

a virgin may rape one to extort her into eloping, and the family of a cuckolded husband may attack and kill the adulterer." As for "peaceful" or "gentle" primitives, anthropologists have found that "the !Kung San [of the Kalahari Desert] have a murder rate higher than that of American inner cities," while the "gentle Tasaday," a tribe discovered in the Philippine rain forest that supposedly lived "with no words for conflict, violence, or weapons," turned out to be an outright fraud concocted by the crooked government of Ferdinand Marcos.

The death rates from primitive warfare may sound low compared to those of modern wars, but many of the intellectuals impressed by them "do not notice that two deaths in a band of fifty people is the equivalent of ten million deaths in a country the size of the United States." Prof. Pinker cites data that show that the proportion of male deaths caused by war in primitive cultures dwarfs that of the United States and Europe even in the bloodiest of all centuries, the 20th.

It is civilized man who reduces the number of war deaths, not primitives.

Prof. Pinker is firm and clear about the “inherent” or “innate” characteristics and behavior of human beings—human nature—that exist before anyone has a chance to scribble on the blank slate. Not only aggression and sexual differences but also intelligence he acknowledges to be in large part genetically grounded, but on the Big Taboo—race—he is vague and even contradictory.

He endorses the environmentalist theories of the origins of civilization of Jared Diamond and Thomas Sowell as opposed to racial ones, and tells us that “My own view . . . is that in the case of the most discussed racial difference—the black-white IQ gap in the United States—the current evidence does not call for a genetic explanation.” Yet, six pages later, he tells us that “. . . there is now ample evidence that intelligence is a stable property of an individual, that it can be linked to features of the brain (including overall size, amount of gray matter in the frontal lobes, speed of neural conduction, and metabolism of cerebral glucose), that it is partly heritable among individuals, and that it predicts some of the variations in life outcomes such as income and social status.” Combined with the different scores of blacks and whites on IQ tests, of course, this implies that the “most discussed racial difference” has a significantly genetic and not an environmentalist explanation.

Prof. Pinker also tries to evade the implications of racial differences by emphasizing the universal meaning of human nature.

“Discarding the Blank Slate has thrown far more light on the psychological unity of humankind than on any differences,” and, further:

“People are qualitatively the same but may differ quantitatively. The quantitative differences are small in biological terms, and they are found to a far greater extent among the individual members of an ethnic group or race than between ethnic groups or races. These are reassuring findings. Any racist ideology that holds that the members of an ethnic group are all alike, or that one ethnic group differs fundamentally from another, is based on false assumptions about our biology.”

That’s all swell, except that (a) the members of an ethnic group *are* all alike, in that they are closer genetically to each other than to members of other groups and (b) no one seriously claims that every black is intellectually inferior to every white, let alone that blacks and whites “differ fundamentally.” The point is that modern psychology (and increasingly, biology) shows that blacks on av-



Samoan girl: Happy little sex fiend?

erage have significantly lower intelligence than whites. If the norms of a society are to be determined by what is true on average of its members (as social norms almost always are), then the racial differences in IQ are socially significant. How the society will define and institutionalize that significance is another matter, and not one necessarily determined by science.



Margaret Mead wanted to believe it.

What is perhaps more important about Prof. Pinker’s book than what he says or contrives not to say about race, however, is how he tries to wiggle out of the implications of discarding the blank slate/noble savage ideology. That ideology has implied that human beings are malleable and that human society can be reconstructed along utopian lines; its proponents, Prof. Pinker writes accurately, “saw the malleability of humans and the autonomy of culture as doctrines that might bring about the age-old dream of perfecting mankind. We are not stuck

with what we don’t like about our current predicament, they argued. Nothing prevents us from changing it except a lack of will and the benighted belief that we are permanently consigned to it by biology.”

But if the blank slate concept is not true, it follows that not only the political agenda that sought a perfected mankind and society but also the very ethic that championed such perfection as the morally obligatory ideal is without foundation. If a classless, pacific, racially and sexually equal and non-discriminatory, and far less acquisitive society is not possible, then the moral ideal that demands that we try to create and realize that society becomes at least meaningless and at worst dangerous—for the simple reason that trying to reach such a goal

merely undermines or destroys the existing society with its traditions, institutions, moral values, and disciplines, and enhances political power to the level of outright tyranny.

Prof. Pinker does glimpse at least part of this truth in pointing out the political horrors to which unrestrained blank slate-ism has actually led. “The Nazi Holocaust was a singular event that changed attitudes toward countless political and scientific topics,” he writes, “but it was not the only ideologically inspired holocaust in the twentieth century . . . the mass killings in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia and other totalitarian states carried out in the name of Marxism” were also justified by their perpetrators precisely in terms of the blank slate doctrine that Marx and his disciples endorsed. “A blank sheet of paper has no blotches,” Mao Tse tung wrote, “and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it, the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it.” Prof. Pinker offers as an earlier example of blank slate-ism run mad the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror against “aristocracy” and inequality. He might also have mentioned the almost equally ruthless crusade that modern liberalism has waged against racial, social, and economic institutions that barred its path to human perfection. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray in *The Bell Curve* and Philippe Rushton in *Race, Evolution, and Behavior* made much the same points about the bloody legacy of egalitarianism.

But what Prof. Pinker does not get or at least what he tries to avoid is the conclusion that rejecting blank slate/noble savage theory leads to the rejection of the liberal-radical-progressivist moral ideals and ethic that the theory created and legitimized. Much of his book is devoted to trying to show that liberal morality and the liberal ethic can survive and indeed are not seriously harmed or challenged by the rejection of the blank slate. Thus, with respect to what we now know about “human differences” and the inherent inequality of human beings, he writes:

“The problem is not with the possibility that people might differ from one another, which is a factual question that could turn out one way or the other. The problem is with the line of reasoning that says that if people do turn out to be different, then discrimination, oppression, or genocide would be OK after all. Fundamental values (such as equality and human rights) should not be held hostage to some factual conjecture about blank slates that might be refuted tomorrow.”

Read closely, the last sentence is rather amazing, because what it claims is that no matter what science concludes about human nature, the liberal ethic of equality and human rights will remain valid—that they are, in a word, sacred, beyond dispute, and beyond the limits of scientific falsification. Indeed, much of Prof. Pinker’s book can be read as a far-reaching attempt to salvage the liberal ethic of equality and human rights as they are currently understood against efforts by the “right”—meaning, presumably, “racists,” “sexists,” and other supposed advocates of “discrimination, oppression, and genocide”—to use the new science of man to challenge that ethic and the political agenda based on it.

But it just doesn’t work, which is why the slowly vanishing champions of the blank slate get so furious whenever someone like Arthur Jensen or Edward O. Wilson or Philippe Rushton or Herrnstein and Murray, et al. challenges their ideology. They know that if human nature is not perfectible, then not only is there no point in trying to perfect it but also there is every good reason not to try—just as there is every good reason for not trying to make an automobile function like a submarine or an airplane. They will claim that rejecting the blank slate will lead to “genocide” and “op-

pression,” and while it doesn’t, it certainly leads to the rejection of the universalism, egalitarianism, radicalism, and obsession with “rights,” and of the tyranny and genocide these have helped cause and justify.

If human beings are not blank slates and noble savages of liberal myth, then they are born with certain inherent traits that social reform and political power cannot alter, and at least a prudential ethic can be grounded on these ineradicable traits of human nature. Prof. Pinker is willing to admit that the more extreme versions of utopianism are not possible, but his catalogue of what he affirms as some of the most indelible and unmistakable traits of human nature suggests an entirely different ethic from that of Rousseau, Marx, and Boas. These traits, which he describes on p. 294, include:

The primacy of family ties in all human societies, which results in nepotism and inheritance.

The limited scope of communal sharing in human groups, which means people will loaf and will not contribute to public goods if reciprocity is not required.

The universality of dominance and violence across human societies and the genetic and neurological mechanisms that underlie it.

The universality of ethnocentrism and other forms of group-against-group hostility, and the ease with which such hostility can be aroused.

The partial heritability of intelligence, conscientiousness, and antisocial tendencies, implying that inequality will arise even in perfectly fair economic systems; that we therefore face an inherent trade-off between equality and freedom.

The prevalence of defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, and cognitive dissonance, by which people deceive themselves about their own autonomy, wisdom, and integrity.

A preference for kin and friends.

A susceptibility to a taboo mentality.

A tendency to confuse morality with conformity, rank, cleanliness, or beauty.

Given that such traits are inherent in human nature and manifest in human behavior, nothing short of massive genetic engineering could create a species capable of realizing liberal ideals. Liberalism (whether the classical version of the 19th century or the modern, social-democratic variety) is characterized by such beliefs as the doctrine of progress

(the idea that human nature changes or can change for the better over time), the capacity of human beings to mold their own nature and their societies to their preferences, the equality of human be-



Blank slate-ism run amok.

ings and the desirability of a more egalitarian society in power and property, the possibility and desirability of world peace and the end of war, the wickedness of any sexual or ethnic discrimination, the rationality and benevolence of basic human instincts, the illegitimacy of any social or political institutions not based on consent, the primacy of the individual and individual freedom over social obligation, and the universality of natural “rights” that belong to all human beings at all times. What we now know of the biological traits of human nature tells us that all these beliefs are false and that the morality that such traits suggest is not a liberal one.

Yet it is by no means clear what kind of morality or ethic Prof. Pinker, given his stated views, is capable of coming up with anyway. “The moral sense is a gadget,” he writes, “an assembly of neural circuits cobbled together from older parts of the primate brain and shaped by natural selection to do a job,” and moral convictions “issue instead from the neurobiological and evolutionary design of the organs we call moral emotions.” Since Prof. Pinker has already stated that what is moral (an “ought”) cannot validly be derived from what is natural (an “is”), his naturalistic explanation of the moral sense denies it any genuine authority. Why should we pay any more attention to the promptings of “neural

circuits cobbled together from older parts of the primate brain” than to the unpleasant feelings of indigestion or headaches? If by surgery or genetic engineering we could eliminate the moral sense or alter it to suit our preferences—humanitarian or genocidal as the case may be—why shouldn’t we? Prof. Pinker’s naturalism as far as I can see offers no answer or grounds for an answer.

In fact, there seems to be no particular reason to think that the new scientific understanding of human nature leads to any new morality or ethic at all, but rather that it largely substantiates

what virtually all cultures regard as “traditional morality”—a morality that assumes the legitimacy of traditional social, family, sex, and race relationships, a morality that evolved naturally because it was grounded in the nature of human beings and was conducive to their survival. The destruction of blank slate foolishness by science, if not by simple common sense, does not so much destroy all morality and ethics as open the door to restoring the old morality. The only “morality” the new science destroys is the false and vicious one concocted by those whose minds are enslaved by blank slate doctrine.

Prof. Pinker has written an outstanding account of why that doctrine leads to false and vicious consequences, but he remains too wedded to the mythological morality spawned by the very blank slate dogmas he refutes to be able to see that the new ethic that should emerge from the new science of man is very much like the old ethic by which a healthier Western man actually lived before the blank slate myth and its proponents seized power and began pouring their poison into our heads. **Ω**

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Missy McLauchlin, RIP

Some victims are more equal than others.

by Jim Lubinskas

Last December marked the tenth anniversary of a vicious but virtually unknown racially-motivated murder. On the night of December 29/30, 1992, Melissa “Missy” McLauchlin was abducted, raped, tortured, and murdered just outside Charleston, South Carolina, simply because of who she was. This killing is not celebrated like the James Byrd and Matthew Shepard murders. “Anti-racist” groups do not include her name in fundraising letters. There is no hate crime legislation named in her memory. There were no MTV or PBS documentaries made about the attack, and ministers did not arrange protests or candlelight vigils. Missy McLauchlin is not a name that comes up in “sensitivity” courses or in lessons on bigotry and intolerance. Indeed, her murder was not even classified as a hate crime by the police. Though the case received much local attention in Charleston ten years ago, even there her name has faded from memory, leaving only family members and a fiancé to grieve. It is because Missy McLauchlin was killed for being white.

Police reports paint a clear picture of what happened. Missy McLauchlin, 25, was a native of Wixom, Michigan, living with her fiancé’s family in North Charleston, South Carolina. On the night

she died she had an argument with her fiancé, John Owen, at a nightclub. She stormed out of the club and began to walk home. Police spotted her, obviously drunk, and gave her a ride home, but she quickly set out on foot for another club. Three black men, Matthew Mack, Matthew Williams, and Joseph Gardner pulled up alongside in a car and started a conversation. They offered her drugs

count of the biggest stories of 1992. When the videotaped beating and arrest of Rodney King came on the air, the third man, Mr. Gardner, spoke of “four hundred years of oppression,” and made a “New Year’s resolution” to “kill a white bitch.”

It was in this state of mind that the four returned to the trailer where the three blacks lived. The men offered Miss



No marches for Missy.

if she would come back to their trailer and have sex with them. Miss McLauchlin, who had a history of drug problems, foolishly accepted their offer.

The men had spent most of the day drinking and watching pornographic videos of black men having sex with white women. At one point Mr. Mack exploded in anger at his white girlfriend, saying he wanted to “stab her,” but that “it ain’t got to be her, any white” would do. Mr. Williams said he wanted to have sex with a white woman. Two hours later, the group watched a television news ac-

McLaughlin no drugs, but she willingly had sex with them—at first. She began to resist, especially when the men wanted to sodomize her, and soon the men were raping her.

They put out the word within the trailer park that they had “captured a white woman,” and three other blacks arrived and raped her. Two black women, girlfriends of some of the rapists, were present in another room of the trailer, but did nothing to stop the attack.

After they had enough, the men decided to get rid of the evidence—including Miss McLauchlin. They soaked her in bleach and hydrogen peroxide, and scrubbed her under the shower with a nylon brush, in the hope of ridding her skin of sperm or other evidence that could be linked to them. They forced her to scrub out her vagina with the same chemicals. They also talked openly of killing her.

The men handcuffed her, blindfolded her, and put a heavy coat over her head. They then took her to a car, and forced her down onto the floorboards in the back. After they had driven for some time, she managed to get out of the handcuffs and began to struggle. Joseph