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# The New Darwinism in the Humanities

## Part I: From Plato to Pinker

It may not be too much to say that sociology and the other social sciences, as well as the humanities, are the last branches of biology waiting to be included in the Modern Synthesis.

—Edward O. Wilson in 1975<sup>1</sup>

But the intellectual climate is showing signs of change. Ideas about human nature, while still anathema to some academics and pundits, are beginning to get a hearing. Scientists, artists, scholars in the humanities, legal theorists, and thoughtful laypeople have expressed a thirst for the new insights about the mind that have been coming out of the biological and cognitive sciences.

—Steven Pinker in 2002<sup>2</sup>

**P**latonic idealism—the view that Mind is more real than Body—may have been an epochal contribution to the lifting of mankind a few notches above the savagery of the flesh, inspiring Christianity with the sense of a “higher” and less carnalized reality that led to the Cartesian establishment of Mind as autonomous and supreme. But after twenty-five hundred years of grand, self-flattering illusions about the “spirituality” and autonomy of man’s unconquerable mind, a case could be made for spirituality as another, more genteel, covert form of savagery and control, another sort of narcissistic power-ploy—which of course Nietzsche had already zeroed in on a century ago when he attacked it as (to coin a phrase) the guerilla warfare of the weak, “brought on by the violent severance from [man’s] animal past . . . his declaration of war against the old instincts that had hitherto been the foundation of his power, his joy, his awesome-

<sup>1</sup> Although this remark first appeared in the original 1975 edition of Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, I quote it here from the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of this work, published by Harvard University Press in 2000, where it appears on page 4.

<sup>2</sup> [THE BLANK SLATE: The Modern Denial of Human Nature](#), by Steven Pinker. Viking, \$27.95. Page 134.

ness. . . . What bestialities of idea burst from him, the moment he is prevented ever so little from being a beast of action.”<sup>3</sup> The dark side of “spiritual autonomy,” “free will,” and “the ghost in the machine” is not just a matter of Catholic priests revealing that they share the drives of other men or Jerry Falwell, as Jupiter Tonans, hurling hate-filled thunderbolts in the name of “God” at everybody he happens not to like. It’s more serious than all that.

What if the self-confidence of the “mental,” its sense of its own transcendence, its belief that it comes from above rather than from below, turned out, as per Nietzsche, to be the greatest self-deception of all, exquisitely screwing up the psyches rather than barbarously maiming the bodies of those whom it tyrannizes (though it’s also done plenty of maiming)? One would want to know what, besides Plato, Descartes, church dogma, uncompromising utopian ideologies such as Marxism and Nazism, or today’s mandarin political correctness, could have authorized the hubris that underwrites such confidence in the autonomy of the mental, its disconnection from a materiality that keeps dragging it back down to earth anyhow?

A humility-inducing lesson could be derived from a rapid review of the evolutionary calendar, which can hardly fail to astonish a generation for whom “classic” is apt to signify little more than the venerability of a soft drink. Although the time-scheme of this calendar is subject to frequent revision, a ballpark set of figures is good enough to drive home the point.

So let us say that the Big Bang, the source of all our woe, “occurred,” if that’s the word for it, fifteen billion years ago and that life—a one-celled sort of nothing-very-much—didn’t appear until twelve billion years later. Mammals we probably wouldn’t even recognize didn’t emerge until about two hundred million years ago, and it was only a mere sixty-five million years ago, after the end of the dinosaurs, that reasonably familiar looking animals entered the scene. With primates fifty million years back and hominids only seven, we are noticing a definite speedup. Still, more than another six million years had to pass before *Homo sapiens* took over, say fifty to a hundred thousand years ago. The most shocking realization of all is that the hunter-gatherer phase of hominids lasted for millions of years until, only

<sup>3</sup> Quoted passim from *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing (New York, 1956).

ten thousand years ago, practically yesterday, the advent of farming introduced the settled communities we regard as civilization, which transformed human life in every conceivable way, setting off a rapid and conscious development of what today we call the arts and sciences.

Intellectual free-play, that is, the use of the brain/mind for purposes other than immediate needs, is a by-product of Darwinian selection that results in phenomena like metaphysics and computer games, whereas evolutionary psychologists connect the human brain's startling enlargement with the challenges of day-to-day survival. When bipedalism brought primates down from the trees, more intelligence was required to make tools for terrestrial living, to escape and outwit predators, and to hunt down other animals for food. Eventually, human brains became so large that surviving fetuses began to be born before they were fully viable, with heads having reached a size that overtaxed removal from the womb. Anyone who has watched the Discovery Channel or *National Geographic* on TV has seen the young of other species walking around twenty minutes after emerging from their mothers. *Homo sapiens* requires years.

Although the amazing hominid brain took billions of years to evolve from the beginnings of life, human narcissism, both religious and secular, has tried to cut it loose, as Mind, from its material origins and treat it as a magical self-sustaining faculty with few predispositions. Somehow defying the parameters of all other kinds of existence, it is seen as a supposedly passive agency that can be molded like clay by churches, academies, and civil laws despite the only too obvious effects produced upon it not only by its evolutionary history but by food, air, water, drugs, toxic chemicals, fatigue, moods, disease, and age. As for the evolutionary and genetic pressures on brain predispositions, the grandiose notion of "human freedom" has made that a subject almost taboo. It is increasingly the task of the "Modern Synthesis" (an amalgamation of Darwinian evolutionary science and post-Mendelian genetics), of evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and now the new Darwinism in the humanities, to counter this dangerous and overweening trend of ascribing our longings, fantasies, and productions entirely to social imprints on a blank and somehow "free" slate instead of acknowledging their mortal and finite provenance in earth-generated flesh. Indeed, it

is our very material limitations that enable us to be the creatures we are: without our perceptual constraints (to use a few examples that come to mind), movies would look like a series of still photographs, television screens and computer monitors would exhibit scannings and refreshings, not moving pictures, and the music on compact disks would suffer 44,000 audible interruptions per second between the digital samplings. Or as Alexander Pope put it, we'd die of a rose in aromatic pain.

The publication of Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* is a felicitous event affording a rich account of the foundations underlying the Darwinian interventions in the humanities to be discussed in the second part of this essay. Exhibiting all of Pinker's characteristic virtues—a lucid, demotic, incisive prose, a wide-ranging intellect, a skillful appropriation of popular culture, affability combined with straight talk, enormous learning allied with good sense—the book is destined to alter a discourse that has been held in check by political correctness and human vanity for much too long. Its founding idea, that the mind, an abstract term for the activities of a certain kind of brain—ours—is fully embedded in its matrix and not a free-floating independent entity (in fact, no “entity” at all), is hardly a new one. Even in the humanities, though scattered and fragmentary, treatments of this theme—such as Frederick Turner's *Natural Classicism*, with its vision of aesthetics as expressions of primordial biological preferences—have been around for some time. But the decisive event—for Pinker and everyone else sympathetic to his stance—was the appearance in 1992 of *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*,<sup>4</sup> a collection of essays by diverse hands, created by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby. What has become the *locus classicus* of the field is the book's opening essay by Cosmides and Tooby: “The Psychological Foundations of Culture,” a systematic, counterrevolutionary manifesto that established the terms and issues of subsequent discourse in this arena.

The orthodoxy that triggers revolt for Cosmides and Tooby can be represented by a remark by Emile Durkheim from 1895, a sentiment whose influence shaped the social sciences for almost a century: “Collective representations, emotions, and tendencies

<sup>4</sup> *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed by Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (New York, 1992).

are caused not by certain states of the consciousness of individuals but by the conditions in which the social group, in its totality, is placed. Such actions can, of course materialize only if the individual natures are not resistant to them; *but these individual natures are merely the indeterminate material that the social factor molds and transforms.*" [Emphasis added by Cosmides and Tooby.] From this are generated the two most powerful themes of *The Adapted Mind*: the "Standard Social Science Model," or SSSM, and the "blank slate":

The Standard Social Science Model requires an impossible psychology. Results out of cognitive psychology, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, developmental psychology, linguistics, and philosophy converge on the same conclusion: A psychological architecture that consisted of nothing but equipotential, general-purpose, content-independent, or content-free mechanisms could not successfully perform the tasks the human mind is known to perform or solve the adaptive problems humans evolved to solve—from seeing, to learning a language, to recognizing an emotional expression, to selecting a mate, to the many disparate activities aggregated under the term "learning culture." . . . Although most psychologists were faintly aware that hominids lived for millions of years as hunter-gatherers or foragers, they did not realize that this had theoretical implications for their work. More to the point, however, the logic of the Standard Social Science Model informed them that humans were more or less blank slates for which no task was more natural than any other.

The appeal of the SSSM is that it provides a rationale for social engineering and political correctness, for promulgating such egalitarian absurdities as the doctrine that there are no substantive psychological differences between the sexes, a doctrine that has finally run its course. Or as Cosmides and Tooby put it, "A program of social melioration carried out in ignorance of human complex design is something like letting a blindfolded individual loose in an operating room with a scalpel—there is likely to be more blood than healing." Rhetorically asking how "it is possible for pre-linguistic children to deduce the meanings of the words they hear when they are in the process of learning their local language for the first time," they reply that infants' powers of interpretation "must be supplied by the human universal meta-culture the infant or child shares with adults by virtue of their common humanity," in other words, their evolved nature.

Pinker's book opens up and expands upon these issues for a

general audience, a fitting sequel to his previous books, *How the Mind Works* and *The Language Instinct*. His central task is to give a fatal blow to the dying orthodoxy of the Blank Slate, the Noble Savage, and the Ghost in the Machine. In the introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary republication of *Sociobiology*, E. O. Wilson, speaking of Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, writes, "They disliked the idea, to put it mildly, that human nature could have any genetic basis at all. They championed the opposing view that the developing human brain is a tabula rasa. The only human nature, they said, is an indefinitely flexible mind. Theirs was the standard position taken by Marxists from the late 1920s forward: the ideal political economy is socialism and the tabula rasa mind of people can be fitted to it. A mind arising from a genetic human nature might not prove conformable." Pinker spends a goodly portion of his book amplifying the objections to this view:

I first had the idea of writing this book when I started a collection of astonishing claims from pundits and social critics about the malleability of the human psyche: that little boys quarrel and fight because they are encouraged to do so; that children enjoy sweets because their parents use them as a reward for eating vegetables; that teenagers get the idea to compete in looks and fashion from spelling bees and academic prizes; that men think the goal of sex is an orgasm because of the way they were socialized.

Pinker describes all of these as "preposterous." Bellicosity, cravings for sweets, sexual ornamentation, and male promiscuity have been well established as mating, kinship, and survival maneuvers not only among hominids and primates but to some extent among other animals as well. Far from being socially constructed, they shape the institutions of society, and far from perverting the goodness of noble savages, they are the raw materials of unreflective animal behavior. "A thoroughly noble *anything*," Pinker reports, "is an unlikely product of natural selection, because in the competition among genes for representation in the next generation, noble guys tend to finish last." Along with face recognition, aversion to incest and snakes, and language acquisition, they are members of an enormous list of cross-cultural behaviors that Pinker appends to the end of this book as "Donald E. Brown's List of Human Universals." Pinker describes the predispositions on the list as "a universal complex human nature . . . of

emotions, drives, and faculties for reasoning and communicating.” They are “difficult to erase or redesign from scratch, were shaped by natural selection acting over the course of human evolution, and owe some of their basic design (and some of their variation) to information in the genome.” As for the Ghost in the Machine, better known as the “self,” this presents a touchy subject indeed, since it entails the concept of free will, a notion for which Pinker has little regard, though he avoids a set piece on the subject and gets by with *passim* remarks. But his view is clear enough: unless you accept the idea that there is an immortal human soul injected into the human body by God at the time of birth, there is no conductor of the psychological orchestra, so to speak, just billions of neurons forming systems that feel like a self. The absence of such a conductor even as we experience changes in our psychological outlooks undermines the belief that *we* (i.e., through a controlling self) “can change what we don’t like about ourselves.” But, Pinker asks, “Who or what is the ‘we’? If the ‘we’ doing the remaking are just other hunks of matter in the biological world, then any malleability of behavior we discover would be cold comfort, because we, the molders, would be biologically constrained. . . .”<sup>5</sup> For the “self” tends to be thought of “as a control panel with gauges and levers operated by a user—the self, the soul, the ghost, the person, the ‘me.’ But cognitive neuroscience is showing that the self, too, is just another network of brain systems.” And, I would add here, even if there were a magical little homunculus running the show from inside us, unless it were self-created it would be simply another collection of *données* that “we” didn’t choose. And how could anything be self-created? Can a “free” and “undetermined” blank create a richly featured and desiring self? To create anything one must have drives, needs, goals, longings, emotions, preferences, in other words, a shaped character that generates behavior. Nothing can come from nothing. It’s not that we “don’t have free will,” it’s that there’s nothing actual or potential that could correspond to it. It’s an unthinkable thought that reveals its emptiness as soon as you try to focus on it. In sum, we’re as “free” as we need to be, since the flexibility and available options for expression are immense. Witness the myriad human cultures that populate the world. It is this infinite variety that has concealed the underlying

<sup>5</sup> I have eliminated a few layers of quotation marks here for the sake of readability.

universal human predispositions. From these varied possibilities, choices (to use the passive) *are made*—if not by a “we” then by an unconscious system that makes like a we. But as motivationless “free” blanks we’d be as inert as stones, having nothing to express. It’s one thing to lament not being able to fly like birds, since there are birds that actually fly. It’s something altogether else to lose sleep at night about not being “free,” when nothing in the universe (except perhaps for the Big Bang) is without constraining antecedents. To exist is already to be a defined and characterized *something*. It’s too late to create a self ex nihilo (which couldn’t be done in any case).

Pinker devotes much of his book to dealing with the fears and objections behind resistance to a critique of this trinity of obsolete metaphysical ideas—of blank slates, noble savages, and ghosts in machines. But he also wants to be clear about the dangers of rejecting one extreme in order to embrace another: “The idea of ‘biological determinism’—that genes cause behavior with 100 percent certainty—and the idea that every behavioral trait has its own gene, are obviously daft.” If culture does not inscribe human nature upon a blank slate, neither do genes prescribe the forms in which culture realizes the genetic drives, forms that are varied beyond reckoning.

The fears that Pinker describes stem from the supposed threats to “progressive ideals” that served as platforms for the radicals of the sixties who are now the establishment. They feared inequality, differences in intelligence, differences between the races (which may or may not require quotation marks, depending on your political orientation). They feared imperfectibility, “a permanently wicked human nature” that predisposed men to promiscuity and rape, to violence and war, to selfishness—and the hysterical and distorted responses to recent books on rape and on adult-child sexuality (mainly by unreflective moralists who didn’t read the books) testify to the persistence of noble savage fantasies about human drives (which, as Pinker reminds us, also have their altruistic side). As for the fear of determinism, it is just a variant of the question of free will discussed above. In reply to which, Pinker’s choice of a passage from Hume, like so many of his illustrative references, is wonderfully apt: “Either our actions are determined, in which case we are not responsible for them, or

they are the result of random events, in which case we are not responsible for them.” And, finally, the fear of nihilism is a fear that biological explanations of the mind “may strip our lives of meaning and purpose.” Pinker’s chapters on these fears are so discursive and nuanced that it is impossible to do them justice here.

Pinker’s examination of brain development suggests that many human problems “may come from a mismatch between the purposes for which our cognitive faculties evolved and the purposes to which we put them today.” What we once called the soul consists of the information-processing activity of the brain, a process that can be adapted to the contemporary world by education rather than reliance on intuition, since our intuitions are too implicated in our animal history. And the education Pinker recommends for living in our high-tech society steers us toward the sciences, toward economics and biology, and away from the classical liberal arts, an ironic twist, given Pinker’s own well-stocked mind.

In a section called “Hot Buttons,” Pinker dwells on politics (one of the best chapters in the book), gender, violence, children, and the arts. (Again, too many riches to outline here.) “My own view,” he concludes, “is that the new sciences of human nature really do vindicate some version of the Tragic Vision and undermine the Utopian outlook that until recently dominated large segments of intellectual life.” Yet, despite his lack of optimism about violence, human morality, unequal heritability of intelligence, ethnocentrism and so forth, this does not come off as a pessimistic book. His own vital character as a person militates against it.

As he moves toward the finish line, Pinker turns his attention to the arts. Unlike many public intellectuals, he does not see them as going through a period of unusual trouble. Rather, he sees them flourishing more than ever. “Art is in our nature—in the blood and in the bone, as people used to say; in the brain and in the genes, as we might say today.” But as he reviews conflicting theories about what art is for, he does find problems. Although one of these stems from the desire for status, in the artist as a striving for novelty, and in the audience as an instance of conspicuous consumption, his main culprits are modernism and postmodernism. He corrects Virginia Woolf’s jocular remark that

human nature (actually, she wrote “human character”) changed in 1910 by explaining that “Modernism certainly proceeded *as if* human nature had changed. All the tricks that artists had used for millennia to please the human palate were cast aside.” Taking cues from Frederick Turner regarding preferences built into our natures over millions of years, Pinker accuses modernism and postmodernism of being “based on a false theory of human psychology, the Blank Slate.” They “cling to a theory of perception that was rejected long ago: that the sense organs present the brain with a tableau of raw colors and sounds and that everything else in perceptual experience is a learned social construction,” which, needless to say, modernism and postmodernism have tried to shake up and disorient. But the visual system of the brain is hardly so passive: it irresistibly organizes sense data “into surfaces, colors, motions, and three-dimensional objects. We can no more turn the system off and get immediate access to pure sensory experience than we can override our stomachs and tell them when to release their digestive enzymes.” Beyond this, the visual system “colors our visual experience with universal emotions and aesthetic pleasures,” so that people prefer savannah landscapes, beautiful faces, consonant sounds, narrative fiction, and so on. The attempts by modernist writers and artists to “make it new,” to cut the connections between biologically sanctioned forms and aesthetic response, have been only a partial success, as the failure of serial music has demonstrated. *Piss Christ* and *Tilted Arc*, to name two against-the-grain visual artifacts that come to mind, did not enchant their viewers, however self-satisfied their creators seem to have been. Although Pinker enthusiastically commends a wide range of modernism’s products, he is not happy with its disdain of “beauty” and its desire to frustrate our in-built nostalgia for the mud from which we spring. Moreover, the need to succeed in a market-driven society has encouraged artists to push things very far for their shock, media, and commercial values. Pinker has a warm spot for the primal directness of “middlebrow realistic fiction” because, as he believes, there is no necessary connection between the pretensions of elite high art and moral enlightenment. Quoting George Steiner to the effect that the Nazis could listen to Schubert in the morning and gas Jews in the afternoon, he is less impressed with the ethical claims of radical artists than with the unconscious

psychobiological nourishment provided by more or less archetypal art forms. “The dominant theories of elite art and criticism in the twentieth century grew out of a militant denial of human nature. One legacy is ugly, baffling, and insulting art. The other is pretentious and unintelligible scholarship.”

I can already hear voices attacking Pinker as a Philistine, but I believe they would be wrong. Pinker and E. O. Wilson are virtuoso science thinkers who have mastered the basics of contemporary humanistic culture. To accuse them of not speaking with the more subtle and complex voices of critics and theoreticians from inside the humanities would be unfair—they *aren't* insiders. They speak as super-intelligent polymath outsiders, and they do a pretty good job of it. As Paul Gross and Norman Levitt kept telling us in *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science*,<sup>6</sup> humanists in general are totally ignorant about the sciences, and their facile references to Einstein and Heisenberg make scientists laugh. Pinker and Wilson do a much more impressive job with the humanities than any humanist I know has been able to do with the sciences. They practice the consilience they recommend to others. While valuing their insights, we don't have to accept their aesthetic judgments as the last word, since the matter of “beauty” in the arts is complex. We know that late Beethoven, late Wagner, Mahler, Stravinsky, Picasso, some of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, etc., were at first regarded as “ugly” and now are so naturalized as to present few problems. What hasn't been assimilated—*Finnegans Wake*, *Moses und Aron*—may be the sort of artifacts that affirm Pinker's judgment.

As he concludes his overview, Pinker remarks: “Within the academy, a growing number of mavericks are looking to evolutionary psychology and cognitive science in an effort to reestablish human nature at the center of any understanding of the arts.” It is unnecessary to reproduce his list of luminaries here because I will turn to several of them in the second part of this account.

*[Part II: “Back to Nature, Again” will appear in the Summer 2003 issue.]*

<sup>6</sup> I discuss this book in “My Science Wars,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLIX, No. 4 (Winter 1997), pp. 599–609.