

# **MY IMPRESSIONS FROM READING Steven Pinker's**

## ***"the blank slate; The Modern Denial of Human Nature"***

**(Viking, New York, 2002)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**With three books to his name, why this Pinker book? Because in it he takes on his critics from every side. This makes it a fascinating source of insight into this man's mind. Pinker is worthy of his foes, he is at least their equal!**

**I came to this book prepared to dislike it for what others said Pinker had said in his previous books. But reading it, I was more and more impressed. I found myself saying over and over in my small mind that I agree with this, with that, with almost everything the man says!**

**Except where the notion of the mechanical nature of the self is concerned. There I have to step aside and allow him his expertise, but I also reserve the right to remain skeptical.**

**I was thrilled with some of Pinker's observations on the apparent lack of ethics that seem to go hand in hand with some of the more religiously or ideologically based rejections of the mechanistic-self implications of modern, evolutionary-biology based concepts of human nature. I agreed with the observations about the ridiculous and callous results of some of the policies based on the older,**

**traditional ideas of human nature, based on religious views regarding the time of its conception, its value, etc. Perhaps 90% of the book handles these issues and is fascinating. But I am on a mission here to address the nature of human nature, so we will focus very narrowly. At first.**

## **OF MIND, SELF, AND SOUL**

**Pinker's critics (like Schroeder) are right, Pinker makes no apologies for believing that science is showing in a definitive way that the self, the soul, the mind are the results of the physical structure and biological functioning of the brain. Biology determines the nature of all of the above. When you die, the self, soul and mind cease to exist because they are illusions created by the brain.**

**My intellect agrees so vehemently that its shaking my head "yes!" is giving me a headache. My intuition is not convinced. But then Pinker suggests my intuition, the work of the left side of my brain, "is a spin-doctor" and a "baloney generator." (Page 43) OK, we have definitely drawn a sharp line here. Where do I stand? Straddling it, of course.**

**On pages 42 and 43 Pinker makes some straightforward statements about the nature of the self. He mentions the terrible complexity of the brain's microscopic structure, something Schroeder says he sweeps under the rug because it indicates the brain to have been designed, not formed by accumulations of genetic accidents.**

**Under the microscope, brain tissue shows a staggering complexity,—a hundred billion neurons connected by a hundred trillion synapses—that is commensurate with the staggering complexity of human thought and experience. Neural network modelers have begun to show how the**

**building blocks of mental computation, such as storing and retrieving a pattern, can be implemented in neural circuitry. And when the brain dies, the person goes out of existence.**

**That is pretty blunt. Pinker puts emphasis on the brain powers of illusion: the idea of the self is such an illusion:**

**Each of us *feels* that there is a single "I" in control. But that is an illusion that the brain works hard to produce, like our impression that our visual fields are rich in detail from edge to edge. . . . [He explains that this is not so, it is an illusion.] . . . The brain does have supervisory systems in the prefrontal lobes and anterior cingulate cortex, which can push the buttons of behavior and override habits and urges. But those systems are gadgets with specific quirks and limitations; they are not implementations of the rational free agent traditionally identified with the soul or the self.**

**Pinker then cites research to support points such as these, including experiments that show that the left hemisphere makes up stuff to match its impressions of reality when fed dissonant information. Of course in real life situations it is actually extrapolating facts from experience and observation, something Pinker does not mention, but something that computer modelers attempt to have computers do in a reasoned and mathematically/statistically defensible way. Pinker does not see this as a positive thing, however:**

**The spooky part is that we have no reason to think that the baloney-generator in the patient's left hemisphere is behaving any differently from *ours* as *we* make sense of the inclinations emanating from the rest of *our* brains. The conscious mind—the self or soul—is a spin doctor, not the commander in chief.**

**Pinker mentions that Sigmund Freud observed that science has heaped through great outrages on self loving, naive humanity. He paraphrases these three outrages in these words:**

**. . . the discovery that our world is not the center of the celestial spheres but rather a speck in a vast universe, the discovery that we were not specially created but instead descended from animals, and the discovery that often our conscious minds do not control how we act but merely tell us a story about our actions.**

**Pinker observes that Freud was right, but wrong in presuming that his psychoanalytic science was delivering this last insult, it took neuroscience to do so conclusively.**

**So, you get the picture? Before this discussion, on page 41, he quotes a Dostoevsky character in 1880 already saying that he finds the new science magnificent but "I am sorry to lose God!" Of course, with the loss of the soul as a viable entity within our being, an entity presumably connected or at least related to God, we also lose God.**

**Pinker spends most of his book arguing that rather than fearing this release from illusion because it makes morality irrelevant (no payoff or punishment after this life), it gives us the opportunity to face ethical and inequity problems squarely and realistically and seek to solve them in this life. Pinker pursues this theme for hundreds of pages and I found the whole thing fascinating and found myself in agreement on most all his observations of what needs fixing in society.**

**Pinker also attacks the idea that morality needs God and religion to survive as a meaningful force. He argues that morality is independent of religion, that it is a universal force built into**

**humans just as many other instincts are, etc. Of course it can be modified, it can be augmented by learning from our own experience or the instructions of others.**

**I had hundreds of pages marked in this book, for the keen observations Pinker makes on the shortcomings of modern societies aided and abetted by maintaining (against the evidence of science) certain religion-based illusions about the nature of humans and life. But that is not really what we are after in this review, so I will cite one more piece from Pinker, but I will do it in the review (next) addressing Intelligent Design.**

**It is obvious why those trying to defend a more traditional view of human nature tend to despise Pinker's works.**