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Through the distinctive readings of Pinker, Ehrlich, Silko, Limerick, Griffin, Ortega, Berry and Morrison, one may discover a previously unknown view regarding human nature. Each author brings slightly different views and connotations of issues to the table and discusses multiple theories regarding human behavior. Nevertheless, there are similar underlying tones within several of the texts. It is important to closely evaluate the similarities and differences between the texts in order to draw accurate conclusions regarding the issue of human nature.

Steven Pinker, author of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature,* suggests theories and philosophies as a basis for his opening discussion; he then uses refutation as a means of exemplifying his views. He discredits three main methaphors: the blank slate, the ghost in the machine, and the idea of the noble savage. In regards to the blank slate theory, Pinker does a nice job in supplying information on both sides of the spectrum; however, justly so, the highlight of his chapters examines why the blank slate theory is ineffective and untrue. He believes humans are born with an innate basic knowledge of the world around them. Conjectures made by other experts which suggest that humans are born with no knowledge on any subject matter are flawed in the eyes of Pinker. Although he believes the innate knowledge is added to and develops as we grow, within his book, he also alludes to the fact that human nature is slightly influenced by culture and experience. Nevertheless, Pinker is an outspoken supporter in the nature vs. nurture debate, citing nature as a greater influence than nurture.

Within the argument, Pinker dedicates a significant portion of the reading to address common misconceptions and fears in hopes that the reader will use them to credit his reasoning regarding human nature. For example, in response to the negative comments regarding humans being born with specific stereotypes or prejudices, Pinker suggests that the similarities we see between people reinforces the list of human universals we as a species possess (141-159). So in fact, critics’ views which support the assumption that we are born a “blank slate” prove to be more prejudicial and biased. If we are born with no conception of people, how is it that we can account for the dislike or judgment of other groups dissimilar from ourselves? Additionally, the optimistic and unrealistic view of the blank slate, eludes that we as humans are capable of anything, whereas the innate view has a more subdued and realistic approach. When we are promised the capacity to achieve success in any pursuit and we fall short, often times it leads to the blaming of others for our shortcomings. In contrast, the ideals of Pinker’s view illustrate the differing innate characteristics of individuals and thus demonstrate a tolerance regarding lack of skills in a certain subject areas (160-165).

Because Pinker’s view acknowledges innate tendencies, we as people are more apt to be able to alter outcomes due to the fact that we are capable of making conscious decisions in regard to projected circumstances. In my opinion, the second substantial piece of information Pinker acknowledges is the fact that human beings are not either innately good or innately bad: in the beginning we are a combination of both (159-174). However, our fate as humans is then determined by events, circumstances, and acquisition of knowledge that ultimately determines the delineation of a good or bad person.

After reading and analyzing the articles; “The Brain on Trial”, “Mind vs. Machine”, and “Brain Gain”, one may begin to understand their relation in regard to Pinker’s text. Their context shares the most similar views to the ideas Pinker presents. Though each article addresses a slightly different issue, the main point of each is that genetics plays the primary influence in the course of human nature.

Throughout the entirety of this text, the author, David Eagleman blatantly points out the distinction between the entities. In his article, he includes stories which illustrate the brain’s relation to behavior. For example, he chronicles the plight of a man who exhibited pedophilic behavior due to the presence of a brain tumor (114). Eagleman points out “When your biology changes, so can you decision-making and your desires…although action on such drives is popularly thought to be a free choice, the most cursory examination of the evidence demonstrates the limits of the assumption” (114). In short, he is concluding the physical make up of our being influences the way we act and live. Eagleman goes on to state that “…every experience throughout our lives can modify genetic expression—activating certain genes or switching others off—which in turn can inaugurate new behaviors” (116). This theory is instrumental in explaining the sometimes sporadic behavior in human. It is also helpful in supporting the theory that we are not born innately good or bad; if genetics are altered throughout the course of our lives, this could explain the tendency to favor either good or bad behavior.

Brian Christian, author of the article, “Mind vs. Machine” makes several interesting remarks in regard to human nature and computers. Throughout the piece he tries to find points of commonality between human behavior and the advancement of computers. “As computers have mastered rarefield domains once thought to be uniquely human, they simultaneously have failed to master the ground-floor basics of human experience-spatial orientation, object recognition, natural language, adaptive goal-setting—…we forget how impressive we are” (68). This illustrates that while computers are constantly adapting and “catching up” to the knowledge level of the human race, there is still a significant gap in its programming. Computers are unable to develop the innate sense of such concepts as object recognition and natural language. Humans are able to understand these notions because they were naturally instilled in us.

In the final article, author Margaret Talbot discusses the brain and the effects certain prescription drugs have in regards to productivity and alertness. A subject brought up and discussed intensively within this text is the fear of imperfectability. Pinker addressed the same issue within his book and cited examples which support that humans believe they will succumb to the undesired or “dark” result. For college students in the “Brain Gain” article, this means not scoring high enough in their courses or not having enough energy to complete their assignments. This fear leads to dependence on drugs; which in turn alter the mind and body of the individual. This further proves the point that humans will go to extreme lengths in order to “keep up” with competition. Selfishness and the need for superiority often outrank the rationale of a person.

In Gretel Ehrlich’s, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, a few reoccurring themes emerge that were addressed in Pinker’s text. Though written in a slightly different context than Pinker’s novel, this book addresses some similar issues. Nevertheless, one main distinction in the views of the respective authors is that Ehrlich places a much greater emphasis on experience and culture in shaping humans than Pinker does.

One of the situations in which the reader uncovers Ehrlich’s stance on the influence of experience on human nature is when she reveals an instance in which she had to herd a group of sheep alone. Never having had the opportunity to herd sheep before, Ehrlich was uneasy when thrust into the role in order to help a comrade; nevertheless, basic instinct and previous knowledge and experience with animals helped her complete her task (54). She acknowledges the fact that she has to form some sort of bond or acquisition of power over the animals. Innate behaviors illustrated a process in which one organism moved to the top of the ranks and lead the rest. While at the beginning of her herding journey she credits her innate animals sense, “…but rather, the intimacy with what is animal in me has returned” (62). However, Ehrlich’s most valued insights came from her experience with animals as well as other sheep herders experience with the beasts. By having previous knowledge of sheep’s feeding geography, she is able to save them from an impending storm (57). She brings up valuable insight by saying, “In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments; there are only consequences” (57). Therefore, nature draws you to gain experiences and insight in order to improve upon the human condition.

Like Pinker, Ehrlich acknowledges and accepts the validity of human universals. Within her novel she explores several different basic human needs. During the course of the novel, Ehrlich uses many instances to portray the solidarity of ranching life; in doing so she elucidates the need for people to have human interaction; “Longing for human company, I felt a foolish grin take over my face; yet I had to resist an urgent temptation to run and hide” (5). Without this basic need being met, problematic situations can occur. It is necessary for people to be able to interact with others in society; when there is a void, recreational and job opportunities diminish. Often times, humans subconsciously realize this need is going unmet and try to find an alternative; “Rusty the dog….was my only companion. I played Scrabble with him every night and won” (42). Circumstances such as these illustrate the importance of the fulfillment of human universals. In Berry’s “The Long-Legged House”, solitude is also prevalent. Though he does not find companionship with animals, one could say he found companionship with the home he built. By building a relationship with the house, Berry supported the idea that everyone needs to connect with someone or something.

Ehrlich also dedicates a significant portion of her novel to the importance of language between a people. Without language; memories, experiences, needs, wants, hopes and fears, would never have the chance to be articulated. Without knowledge of past experiences, mistakes and hardships would constantly be repeated. No one would be aware of the events that took place before their existence. Additionally, communication connects people on a primitive level. “Conversations goes on in what sounds like a private code; a few phrases imply a complex of meanings” (6). It is an essential tool for the growth and expansion of civilizations as well as a needed function of the human condition.

Pinker’s book is one based in studies, research and statistics. I enjoyed this book the least out of all the readings due to the fact that it did not explain human nature through a fictional perspective; however, he made valid and interesting points in a more academic context. Contrastingly, *The Solace of Open* Spaces illustrates the study of human nature in terms of true life experience and examples. I feel these applications of the traits of human nature are more easily relatable though one must look deeper into the meaning of the words in order to derive its context.

Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Storyteller*, is written in a more nonacademic context. Through Native American short stories, legends and poems, Silko is able to demonstrate valuable insight into the study of human nature. Though finding parallels between the stories and the concepts of human nature can sometimes be a challenging feat, the narrative nature of this book makes it much more interesting to read.

One of the main reoccurring themes in Silko’s writing is that of the importance of language. She expresses the importance of language in relationship to historical facts. In one story, she illustrates the fact that all that is important to the Native Americans is slowly being overtaken by the white settlers; “In the distance, she could hear the engines of the machinery the oil drillers had left the winter before…” (26). While language is key to allocating the wrongs brought upon a people, it is also used as a celebration to remember the culture and identity of a group. Through stories such as “Yellow Woman”, Silko was able to showcase the important elements: (rain and corn representing fertility) and demonstrate the livelihood of her people (54).

The most impactful use of language however is the power of words used as an inducer of change. In many examples from the novel, the injustices of the Native American people were shown. “They will fear what they find. They will fear the people. They will kill what they fear.” (134). Rightly so, many stories are dedicated to the depiction of the evil the White people inflicted on the Native Americans. “They will take the world from ocean to ocean they will turn on each other they will destroy each other up here in these hills they will find the rocks, rocks with veins of green and yellow and black. They will lay the final pattern with these rocks they will lay it across the world and explode everything. Set in motion now set in motion to destroy to kill objects to work for us objects to act for us…” (136). The art of storytelling and writing allow instances such as these to survive for posterity. It allows history to remain a vital part of our society and attempts to ensure heinous events won’t be repeated.

Another main focus of Silko’s work is a representation of the dark side of human nature. In contrast with Pinker, Silko chooses to focus on the downfalls of human society specifically in the reprehensible actions of a few individuals. Silko illustrates the idea that humans tend to draw toward the innately bad side of the spectrum of human behavior. This is exemplified in the story “Storyteller”. Within the pages, a young Native American girl is discovered to have been forced to choose between a miserable existence at “White” boarding school or tolerate sexual abuse from a caregiver (17-32). Neither option demonstrates a positive connotation of the human spirit and thus leads one to believe that humans are capable of no compassion or ethical judgment.

This conclusion of human nature can also be defended after reading the chapter “Haunted America” in Limerick’s book, *Something in the Soil*. In the chapter, Limerick chronicles the life and history of the Modoc Indian Tribe.

“They are tales from hell, as well, because they are stories that drive their tellers and readers to a confrontation with the darkest and grimmest dimensions of human nature. Torture, maiming, rape, mutilations, murder—all of the worst injuries that human beings inflict on each other serve as the capstones to these stories. Whites did these things to Indians, and Indians did these things to whites. Invaded or invader, conquered or conqueror, nearly every group had occasion to use terror as a memorable method of communication” (34). Within the text, Griffin describes an instance in which a white Army troop invaded an Indian village for no apparent reason -other than the fact that the occupants were Native Americans-and destroyed the village’s contents. In response the Indian leaders went to several nearby white ranches and killed their owners (41-42). This situation helps confirm the idea that humans are born and develop as “bad” human beings, unaware of morality and ethical choices.

Additionally, like in Silko’s novel, this chapter recognizes the importance of domination over other cultures: “If you place yourself at a distance, there is no clearer fact in American history than the fact of conquest” (33). After losing battles to the Indians, the white men became more and more angry and realized “…vengeance and unwilling to consider alternatives to the escalation of war” was impossible (46). American soldiers tried to rid the land of Indians and when this failed, they implemented assimilation. The inherent need to try to shape the cultures around you is despicable. The white men believed they were superior and thus needed to transform other cultures to fit their lifestyle and belief system. In many cases, culture and historically significant elements were abandoned but Native Americans; “…denim and calico clothing…” were worn in place of traditional Indian garb (37). The “Americanization” of the Indians showed the effect people with greater influence had; also, these events glorifed the effect of conquest and ruling the ineffective voice the weak had on society.

In analyzing Griffin’s chapter “Our Secret” from the book *A Chorus of Stones*, a reader may find several similarities between its content and that of the previously described texts. Though written in an academic format dissimilar from that of Ehrlich and Silko, Griffin’s ability to flawlessly connect the life of Heinrich Himmler to her own existence demonstrates a humanization of the text. Similar to Limerick, Griffin uses historical events in order to illustrate the basis of human nature. She expounds on the topic further by adding her personal insight into the storyline.

One of the main focuses Griffin illustrates in her chapter is the need for human beings to feel a sense of belonging or participate in institutions greater than themselves. She is the first of the authors whose works were analyzed to point out a definitive link between a sense of belonging and individual purpose in life as traits of human nature. For Himmler, his childhood was filled with unhappiness and a lack of motivation; however, upon reaching adolescence and adulthood, he found his calling through the Nazi regime. “The war has given him a sense of purpose in life” (129). He was able to connect to something in which the purpose was to benefit thousands; not just himself. Also, the pride we are humans seek out was satisfied by the recognition and praise he gained from the German people. In the text, Griffin referred to Himmler’s journal entries; “the entries he makes do not seem so listless now; they have a new vigor” (129). This is because he had an underlying motivation to act and achieve great feats. When there is benefit for us at the end of a task, we as a people are more inclined to participate and offer our services.

The biggest opposition Griffin addresses in regards to previous authors is that she believes nurture and the environment play the significant role in the development of a human being; “what is inside shapes and sustains what appears” (122). In Himmler’s circumstance, “his father must have loomed large to him” (119). Throughout Heinrich Himmler’s life he was constantly prodded by his father to leave his name in history. In a sense, he was stripped of all individuality and “blankness” in order to be a carbon copy of what his father wanted. Being raised with the notion that writing should be factual and contain no emotional trace, Himmler became void of feeling and instead focused on observation (118). “Gradually his father’s voice subsumes the vitality of all his desires and even his rage” (124); thus his true identity is stripped and replaced by one which has been influenced by society and an abusive father. Himmler later became one of the most notorious leaders of the Nazi party. In the same respect Ortega, author of “Man has No Nature”, supports his views regarding the importance of history on human nature by saying, “Man “goes on being” and “unbeing” –living. He goes on accumulating being--the past; he goes on making for himself a being through his dialectical series of experiments” (156). While Ortega acknowledges humans are capable of making uninfluenced decisions, the majority of his article points toward the significance of past experiences and influences.

Though Morrison’s text *Beloved* is a fictional writing, underlying themes regarding human nature color the text. The variation in the style of writing brings a new approach to the study of human nature in that it supports the fact that basic human needs and actions are prevalent in any context. In many cases a piece of prose holds an audience’s attention and is more interesting to draw information from. Therefore, this novel is a key appliance in the study of human nature.

Similar to previously read authors, Morrison eludes to the fact that history and experience drastically alters the persona of an individual. One could argue that although Sethe was born with no innate freedom, she was born with the same knowledge and skill as her white comrades. If her circumstances had differed, she most likely would have been a drastically different character. Nevertheless, her tragic experiences as a young woman destined her life to be one of hardship. Once she came to work at Sweet Home, her life was never the same; after overhearing the school teacher’s lesson on Sethe’s human and animal characteristics, she was completely demoralized and lost belief in her merit as a human being. Additionally, the sexual assault on the night or her escape snatched any power or freedom she had remaining. Demoralized, defeated, and left with three children to care for, Sethe’s outlook was bleak. “And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was self made its home” (140); “Now she is crying because she has no self” (123). Without these tragic circumstances, Sethe’s psychological state would not have caused her to murder her child. The pain and hurt she felt was unbearable, and she did not want to place that on her children. She saw no future for her or her children; “But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more” (70).

The hurt and heartache forced upon the main characters did not only elicit negative memories, but it caused them to become emotionally absent. They had been hurt so many times before, they guarded themselves from feelings in hope that they wouldn’t experience heartbreak again; “…you protect yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest star out of the sky to own…” Expectations were lowered and the need for a purpose in life was nonexistent. In Paul D.’s situation, he locked away his emotions “…in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red hear used to be” (72). The suffering the former slaves had faced eternally damaged their psyche and forced them to withdraw from life.

After reading this selection of texts, I have developed a basic assumption of the three views people have regarding the topic of human nature. The idea of the “blank slate” is one view that might explain our destinies. Nevertheless, I felt the only research that addressed this issue was Pinker’s work. Even then, he simply supplied background information and used the idea as refutation against his thinking. After thinking about the theory and reading research regarding “the blank slate” I have come to the conclusion that there is no possibility of an individual being born with no predetermined thinking or knowledge. Too many questions remain unanswered regarding the way humans would learn and develop without innate reasoning and skills.

Pinker’s main idea that we as humans are predestined by our genetics is a valid answer; however, I don’t believe genetics are solely or even the majority of the reason for why we develop the way we do. Genetics may add to our tendency to act, behave, or live a certain way; nevertheless, without experience and history, humans would never gain an understanding or appreciation of adaptation. When thinking about my influences, I can definitely point to the causes and explain the significance of their examples. My parents, friends, teachers and school have all had impacts on my life. This supports the assumption that human nature is mainly determined by experience. In classes, when asked what has shaped their lives, students respond the same way I did. Additionally, the fact that the human race is constantly adapting and changing on a personal, social and worldwide level supports the assumption that nature influences our being. The aspects of nature and experience in regard to influencing human nature are inarguable. Though some believe we are born with no innate sense of the world, or that genetics dictate the majority of our existence; I believe history and nature are the most significant factor in the determination of the human race.