

PART I

THE BLANK SLATE, THE NOBLE SAVAGE, AND THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Everyone has a theory of human nature. Everyone has to anticipate the behavior of others, and that means we all need theories about what makes people tick. A tacit theory of human nature - that behavior is caused by thoughts and feelings - is embedded in the very way we think about people. We fill out this theory by introspecting on our own minds and assuming that our fellows are like ourselves, and by watching people's behavior and filing away generalizations. We absorb still other ideas from our intellectual climate: from the expertise of authorities and the conventional wisdom of the day.

Our theory of human nature is the wellspring of much in our lives. We consult it when we want to persuade or threaten, inform or deceive. It advises us on how to nurture our marriages, bring up our children, and control our own behavior. Its assumptions about learning drive our educational policy; its assumptions about motivation drive our policies on economics, law, and crime. And because it delineates what people can achieve easily, what they can achieve only with sacrifice or pain, and what they cannot achieve at all, it affects our values: what we believe we can reasonably strive for as individuals and as a society. Rival theories of human nature are entwined in different ways of life and different political systems, and have been a source of much conflict over the course of history.

For millennia, the major theories of human nature have come from religion. The Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, offers explanations for much of the subject matter now studied by biology and psychology. Humans are made in the image of God and are unrelated to animals. Women are derivative of men and destined to be ruled by them. The mind is an immaterial substance: it has powers possessed by no purely physical structure, and can continue to exist when the body dies. The mind is made up of several components, including a moral sense, an ability to love, a capacity for reason that recognizes whether an act conforms to ideals of goodness, and a decision faculty that chooses how to behave. Although the decision faculty is not bound by the laws of cause and effect, it has an innate tendency to choose sin. Our cognitive and perceptual faculties work accurately because God implanted ideals in them that correspond to reality and because he coordinates their functioning with the outside world. Mental health comes from recognizing God's purpose, choosing good and repenting sin, and loving God and one's fellow humans for God's sake.

The Judeo-Christian theory is based on events narrated in the Bible. We know that the human mind has nothing in common with the minds of animals because the Bible says that humans were created separately. We know that the design of women is based on the design of men because in the second telling of the creation of women Eve was fashioned from the rib of Adam. Human decisions cannot be the inevitable effects of some cause, we may surmise, because God held Adam and Eve responsible for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge,

implying that they could have chosen otherwise. Women are dominated by men as punishment for Eve's disobedience, and men and women inherit the sinfulness of the first couple.

The Judeo-Christian conception is still the most popular theory of human nature in the United States. According to recent polls, 76 percent of Americans believe in the biblical account of creation, 79 percent believe that the miracles in the Bible actually took place, 76 percent believe in angels, the devil, and other immaterial souls, 67 percent believe they will exist in some form after their death, and only 15 percent believe that Darwin's theory of evolution is the best explanation for the origin of human life on Earth. Politicians on the right embrace the religious theory explicitly, and no mainstream politician would dare contradict it in public. But the modern sciences of cosmology, geology, biology, and archaeology have made it impossible for a scientifically literate person to believe that the biblical story of creation actually took place. As a result, the Judeo-Christian theory of human nature is no longer explicitly avowed by most academics, journalists, social analysts, and other intellectually engaged people. ...

Nonetheless, every society must operate with a theory of human nature, and our intellectual mainstream is committed to another one. The theory is seldom articulated or overtly embraced, but it lies at the heart of a vast number of beliefs and policies. Bertrand Russell wrote, "Every man, wherever he goes, is encompassed by a cloud of comforting convictions, which move with him like flies on a summer day." For intellectuals today, many of those convictions are about psychology and social relations. I will refer to those convictions as the Blank Slate: the idea that the human mind has no inherent structure and can be inscribed at will by society or ourselves.

That theory of human nature - namely, that it barely exists - is the topic of this book. Just as religions contain a theory of human nature, so theories of human nature take on some of the functions of religion, and the Blank Slate has become the secular religion of modern intellectual life. It is seen as a source of values, so the fact that it is based on a miracle - a complex mind arising out of nothing - is not held against it. Challenges to the doctrine from skeptics and scientists have plunged some believers into a crisis of faith and have led others to mount the kinds of bitter attacks ordinarily aimed at heretics and infidels. And just as many religious traditions eventually reconciled themselves to apparent threats from science (such as the revolutions of Copernicus and Darwin), so, I argue, will our values survive the demise of the Blank Slate.

The chapters in this part of the book (Part I) are about the ascendance of the Blank Slate in modern intellectual life, and about the new view of human nature and culture that is beginning to challenge it. In succeeding parts we will witness the anxiety evoked by this challenge (Part II) and see how the anxiety may be assuaged (Part III). Then I will show how a richer conception of human nature can provide insight into language, thought, social life, and morality (Part IV) and how it can clarify controversies on politics, violence, gender, childrearing, and the arts (Part V). Finally I will show how the passing of the Blank Slate is less disquieting, and in some ways less revolutionary, than it first appears (Part VI).