

HAROLD FROMM

Pinker and Johnson on Human Nature

STEVEN PINKER'S LATEST BOOK, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*,¹ is both thick and thin. As another five-hundred-paged-wonder of the sort we have come to expect from Pinker, it is pretty thick. As a book about "human nature" it is lamentably thin. Having just read a review that proclaimed it his best book yet, I'm in the awkward position of having experienced it as his worst. His previous *magna opera*—*The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works*, and *The Blank Slate*—were remarkable achievements indeed and I have already praised the last of these to the skies in "The New Darwinism in the Humanities."²

Each of these previous books presents the underlying concepts of large areas of contemporary fields of thought: linguistics, psychology, Darwinism, evolutionary biology and psychology, philosophy, and the role of culture in shaping consciousness. These general ideas are instantiated from Pinker's enormous mental data base, including cultural artifacts, classic and popular literary works, and, most winningly, films, TV, even cartoons and comics. His demotic, energized, surprising prose and appealing personality power these books in a distinctive way and give coherence to the multiplicity of facts and insights that might otherwise appear disorganized. One comes away with a set of puissant general ideas, deftly substantiated.

The Stuff of Thought, however, even with all of Pinker's familiar virtues, seems badly under-theorized. The impressive richness of his mind comes off, this time around, as a multitudinous collection of beads strung on a very thin and diaphanous thread that keeps threatening to rupture, scattering the beads in various directions. The string that purportedly holds this book together is its subtitle, *Language as a Window into Human Nature*, and indeed all of the chapters deal in some way with language. But the book reads more like a collection of very disparate essays, forced together, than a developed argument. Collections of essays are fine (I produce them myself), but this one promises much more than it can deliver. The density, pace, rhetorical quality, degree of theorization, presumed audience—all these are quite vari-

¹ THE STUFF OF THOUGHT: Language as a Window into Human Nature, by Steven Pinker. Viking. \$29.95.

² See *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LVI, Nos. 1 and 2 (Spring and Summer 2003).

able, and there really is little to propel or motivate the reader to plow ahead. Some stretches are deadening, and I can't imagine most readers continuing on without skipping, assuming that they can actually make it to the finish line. Pinker keeps telling us that what he is discussing in each chapter gives us some insight into human nature, but it's more of a wish than a deed, since the discontinuities of the narrative leave the reader disoriented, wondering where he really is at any given moment. Pinker's habit of indulging very wide excursions away from his putative subject, as well as his multitudes of anecdotes and allusions—often the best pages in the book—while redeeming qualities in themselves, make the rationale of the already under-theorized discourse even more opaque.

Pinker informs us in the first chapter that his book is about "the ideas, feelings, and attachments that are visible through our language and that make up our nature." In his second chapter he rehashes some of his former books and then launches into a brutally specific account of "locative verbs" and locutions. Basically, "Peter painted on the door" and "Peter painted the door" (but not "Ellie covered an afghan onto the bed") reveals the work that locatives can do. Pinker's claim is that the ability of infants to start understanding these fine distinctions in usage gives us insight into "human nature." Building on Chomskian "nativism," the widely accepted thesis that language acquisition is indigenous within the brain—though Chomsky keeps his distance from evolutionary biology and psychology—Pinker remarks that "a deeper look at which verbs participate in the locative alternation has forced us to take a deeper look at what compels the mind to construe physical events in certain ways." If you like this sort of thing, there are 30 or 40 pages of it, but you're bound to forget the data pretty fast and emerge with a vague and fuzzy sense that it all has something to do with "human nature." The chapter's relentless density might be appropriate for a linguistics journal, but presumably academic linguists know all this. Beyond being struck by some of the points made in passing, the general intellectually curious reader will be blinded by too much light.

The next chapter, on "innate concepts," is equally relentless. Pinker gives us accounts of Jerry Fodor's *Extreme Nativism* (that the mind is imbued with thousands of meanings from Day One), of *Radical Pragmatics*, contra Fodor ("that the mind does not contain fixed representations of the meaning of words"), and finally of *Linguistic Determinism*, that language IS thought. (In *The Language Instinct* and elsewhere, Pinker makes it clear that thought precedes language, and his case is pretty strong, bolstered by an extensive literature of experiments with the ways in which the attention of infants to the external world reveals their understanding right from the start, without language.)

As this chapter nears its end, Pinker writes that he wants to "reinforce a major theme of this book: that language is a window into human nature, exposing deep and universal features of our thoughts and feelings," even if the thoughts and feelings can't be equated with the

words. This reinforcement is badly needed, but Pinker's reminders throughout the book seem to me (I'll take the blame here for being obtuse) acts of desperation rather than convincing theorizing.

In another chapter—too long, like most in this too long book—Pinker expresses a debt to Kant for concepts “about space, time, causality, and substance as they are represented in language, in the mind, and in reality.” Space and time are “reckoned with reference to objects as they are conceived by humans,” including the uses, actions, abilities, and intentions involved in such conceivings. In a chapter on metaphor, Pinker agrees with much that George Lakoff has written, starting with *Metaphors We Live By* (co-authored with Mark Johnson, to whom I will turn below). Summarizing Lakoff, Pinker writes, “Reason is not based on abstract laws, because thinking is rooted in bodily experience. And the concept of objective or absolute truth must be rejected. There are only competing metaphors . . . Western philosophy, then, is not an extended debate about knowledge, ethics, and reality, but a succession of conceptual metaphors.” But Pinker thinks Lakoff goes too far in this picture of human experience as divorced from freestanding reality. So he adds, “Our best science and mathematics can predict how the world will behave in ways that would be a staggering coincidence if the theories did not characterize reality.” As useful as the notion of language as metaphorical translations of experience can be, knowledge and truth, Pinker demurs, are not obsolete.

After an interesting chapter on naming and names that nonetheless gets carried away into extreme tangentiality, Pinker produces what strikes me as the best chapter in the book, “The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television.” Even this one, however, is subject to extreme wandering, so that Pinker is impelled to remind the reader that the train of discourse here is about “involuntary speech perception,” a neuronal tic that causes people to have strong reactions to obscenity and swearing as a result of cultural pressures and upbringing. Despite its excesses, the accounts of “bad” words display Pinker at his most virtuosic, especially in the pages and pages about the word “fuck.” After a penultimate chapter on “Games People Play,” the conclusion, “Escaping the Cave” (a tired reworking of Plato in a last-ditch effort to unify the whole) expresses once again the optimistic hope that “In this book I have given you the view from language—what we can learn about human nature from the meanings of words and constructions and how they are used.” What then follows is essentially a summary of the preceding chapters.

It was a welcome turn from *The Stuff of Thought* (and what *was* the stuff after all, when Pinker believes that thought doesn't require language?) to Mark Johnson's new book, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*.³ Alone and with George Lakoff, Johnson has been writing for years on metaphor and the body, two main foci consolidated

³ THE MEANING OF THE BODY: Aesthetics of Human Understanding, by Mark Johnson. University of Chicago Press. \$32.00.

here along with a focus on the bioscience of human consciousness, which I take to be the book's generating theme. Unlike Pinker's, this book is thin in pages but thick with quite accessible theorization. Although there are none of the multi-media fireworks we experience in Pinker, the argument is nothing if not clear, even labored and repetitious, but worth it in the end, given its passionate unity. Moreover, whereas Pinker kept trying to convince us that his book shed light on "human nature," Johnson rarely if ever mentions that term even as he sheds his own kind of light on who and what we are. Neither thinker, however, treats human nature in these new books from the point of view of Darwinian adaptation except incidentally: Pinker deals with language usage and what it implies about the evolved psychology *underlying it*. Johnson deals with the neuroscientific biology and what it implies about the evolved psychology operating *above it*.

Johnson's main goal, as I see it, is to pound final nails into the coffin of Cartesian dualism while weaning Anglo-American academic philosophy away from its bloodless obsession with the linguistic analysis of sentences and propositions. And blood is at the heart of it. Consider that before farming, before human speech, before language, before reading and writing, there was only the body. Copulation, birth, nurturing, hunting for food, death, and a vivid imagining of paternal/maternal agency behind lightning bolts and everything else—that was primate, hominid, human life. The pre-Socratic philosophers, succeeded by Plato, offered a startling revelation, a new paradigm: thought and thinking, according to Socrates, was a purer form of being in the world than mere gross temporal bodily existence. Ideas had a reality and permanence not possible in a body, which could never achieve their unsullied purity. "Mind" was their vehicle, not corruptible flesh. Christianity, greatly expanding upon the notion of sexual shame in Genesis, institutionalized ideas of the body and its carnal sins as merely a lamentable halfway house, a temporary dwelling en route to immortal being. Descartes expanded further on this by actually claiming to locate a soul, self, spirit, mind that somehow transcended the body while dwelling inside it, lifting *Homo sapiens* uniquely above mere animality. But after many centuries, no souls, selves, spirits, or minds have ever been found. Today, we are experiencing a return to the body in most of the sciences and much of philosophy, with more emphasis on the bodiliness (not the bodilessness) of the brain than ever before. Johnson's title, *The Meaning of the Body*, is a double-play on this: what it means *to be* a body (I almost wrote "to have" a body—old habits die slowly). To "have" a body "you" need to be a resident spook inhabiting one) and what sort of meanings *derive from* the body that is "you."

Johnson takes so much of this book from his joint effort with Lakoff in their 1999 massive opus, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, that the opening declaration of that book could well serve here: "The mind is inherently embodied. Thought is mostly unconscious. Abstract concepts are largely metaphorical." This, in a very tiny nutshell, is the germ of Johnson's

solo endeavor, which leaves out much of the earlier book to concentrate on the issues he finds most central.

Johnson has a lot of detritus to sweep out of the way, truisms accumulated, especially during the last century, by philosophy and the social sciences. Kant, he writes, developed the notion of a "pure reason" that was not dependent on anything empirical and had little to do with our embodied, phenomenal selves. Behind this tradition is the faux distinction between what is "merely" aesthetic feeling and emotion and what is solid (even "transcendent") rational thought. Indeed, this invidious distinction was an assumption that almost went without saying during my undergraduate and graduate school years, except that it *was* said—over and over again. Johnson comments, "Chief among these harmful misconceptions are that (1) the mind is disembodied, (2) thinking transcends feeling, (3) feelings are not part of meaning and knowledge, (4) aesthetics concerns matters of mere subjective taste, and (5) the arts are a luxury (rather than being conditions of full human flourishing)." The heart of Johnson's anti-dualism is a monism that sees all of our experience as derived from and underwritten by one same substance: bodily materiality. An archetypal book of my student days that Johnson refers to was A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*, which regarded propositional statements (to quote Johnson) "as the only meaning that mattered for our knowledge of the world." Starting in infancy, however, meaning (as today's empirical investigative techniques reveal) becomes an expression of bodily needs, honed to the very shape of our arms and legs, beating heart, and hunger for food. "Such concepts as *curved, twisted, diagonal, vertical, zigzag, straight, and circular* get their meaning primarily from our bodily postures, our bodily movements, and the logic of those movements."

Johnson's heroes turn out, unsurprisingly, to be pragmatic and aesthetic, so there is a good deal of quoting and discussing of William James, John Dewey, and Susanne K. Langer, all of whom stressed the role of feeling in thought. From the last twenty years, Antonio Damasio is singled out for his appreciation of the driving, generating role of the emotions in moment-to-moment behavior and thinking, emotions whose origins are ultimately metabolic and neuronal and, most important, non-conscious, not in any Freudian sense of a mythic psychodrama taking place unbeknownst to us but a metabolic, visceral, digestive, heart-pumping, testosterone-tugging, brain-fed neuronal process *very much* unbeknownst to us. If "my heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky," do "I" know anything about its provenance—or the effects of alcohol, coffee, statins, antidepressants, air pollution, or even Twinkies on my moment-to-moment consciousness? Everything that alters my blood alters my brain and alters my thoughts—and determines for me What Makes Sense. There is never *Nothing* working on my consciousness—and it all comes from biochemistry as it processes digestion, bowel movements, personal relations, and Culture.

Even Rationality with a capital R can be seen as ultimately from the

body. Its status derives from its sometimes seemingly "correct" judgments, but it is always measuring and reporting on *our* world, the one experienced by our brains, not by "God." As Lakoff and Johnson emphasize in their joint book, all sorts of "logical" ideas, like "in front of," "behind," "after," and "before," come from our bodies' relationships to what we experience and then become abstracted into logical and mathematical science, on investigation looking a lot less "pure," less from above than below. (Speak of metaphors!) Although Pinker covers some of this territory, there is very little "below" in his accounts. Summarizing James and Dewey, Johnson writes, "To say that reason is embodied means that you can never fully understand its capacities and workings without reference to facts about human bodies, brains, and environments." So-called Pure Reason is highly motivated by "conceptual metaphors" that evolve from basic infantile experiences and characterize even the language of the sciences. "Concepts are neural activation patterns that can either be 'turned on' by some actual perceptual or motoric event in our bodies, or else activated when we merely think about something." What scientists don't know—as yet—because of the infancy of neuroscience itself, is how and where the brain generates these abstractions. Just watching active brain areas light up in fMRIs⁴ tells us something but not enough, as they freely admit.

What Johnson (and Lakoff) want to get rid of are antiquated notions from the "faculty psychology" of the eighteenth century—that there are "faculties" such as reason, imagination, sensation, feeling, understanding. These faculties, even when treated as "modules" in the brain by some current thinkers in evolutionary psychology, have always had the character of spooks. What actual physical thing is a module or a faculty? Are they a handful of magical homunculi directing traffic on billions of neural highways? Johnson wants them eliminated from philosophical conversation since they posit immaterial entities, of which Reason is the most spooky of all. Where is Reason to be found and what is its status of being? Can we really suppose it's like "God" breathing "spirit" into our "animal" bodies? Plunk! The Reason module is inserted, and we're human beings, not apes? Speaking of "concepts that we think of as utterly divorced from physical things," Johnson reminds us that man is "a creature with a body-mind who has neither a disembodied ego nor an eternal soul, for there is no nonbodily entity or process to perform the abstraction" required by such a divorce.

Given Johnson's position that "aesthetics" (in its most global senses, with the biochemical feelings entailed), far from being merely vacuous "emotion," provides the raw materials of thinking, it's no surprise that he concludes his book with several chapters on the arts. Though his treatment of literature and visual art is fairly conventional art criticism, his handling of music (clearly one of his major interests) is deeper and richer, more informed by his book's theses. Quoting from an illuminat-

⁴ functional magnetic resonance imagining

ing essay by the twentieth-century composer Roger Sessions, he makes it clear that music is not a representational art. Music *says* nothing *about* anything but simply *presents* a pattern of human sensorimotor-derived experience not to be translated into something beyond powerful feelings, not even the tablespoon (or was it a teaspoon?) that Richard Strauss claimed (somewhat jokingly, I assume) he could “represent” in his tone poems. “Thinking about how music moves us,” Johnson writes, “is not going to explain everything we need to know about language, but it is an excellent place to begin to understand how all meaning emerges in the flesh, blood, and bone of our embodied experience.” Schopenhauer, I think, is the one who got it most right: in Kantian terms, music is a “thing in itself,” a nut we’ll never crack.

Johnson’s powerful book does not purport to say that we should dispense with other philosophical approaches altogether. Analytic philosophy’s examinations of the logic of sentences and propositions will continue to serve a useful purpose. What a society regards as sanity and rationality is subject to cultural variations: yesterday’s madman is today’s genius culture-hero and vice versa. Nevertheless, there are termini at the edges of the spectrum, beyond which we question whether someone has lost his marbles. All sorts of utterances may be from the body—where else could they be coming from?—but some are unacceptable nonetheless if you are interested in maintaining civilization and/or biological survival. What can we think today of the populations of ancient Greece and Rome who poured their hearts out to Zeus? Whom were they talking to? Even today, vast numbers of people are still entertaining narcissistic fantasies, addressing today’s Zeuses by other culturally acceptable names that in years hence will seem no less whacked out. We still need analytic thinkers who can recognize there’s no music at all in some of our loonier tunes.

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