



## A Pinker View of Almost Everything

A Review of

*Language, Cognition, and Human Nature: Selected Articles*

by Steven Pinker

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Reviewed by

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Steven Pinker is something of a rarity in academic psychology, a literary stylist. In addition to his best-selling, prize-winning trade books, from *The Language Instinct* in 1994 to *The Better Angels of Our Nature* in 2011, he has accumulated a respectable but lesser known list of articles in serious academic journals. *Language, Cognition, and Human Nature: Selected Articles* is a collection of his favorites, covering the period from 1979 to 2010.

A potboiler? Perhaps so, but these articles do allow the general reader to discover gems of writing that might otherwise escape attention. Some of them are probably unknown even to academics because they were published in relatively obscure outlets. In his introduction, Pinker notes the pain of publishing in respectable journals:

The process of getting an article accepted for publication in an academic journal is by far the most unpleasant experience in intellectual life, since it requires devoting time and brainpower to making one's article *worse* in an abject effort to satisfy the whims of an anonymous referee. (p. x)

That comment alone may be worth the price of the book, especially to neophyte academics struggling to crack the publishing game. If even Pinker has problems, then their own perceived talents may not be so meagre after all.

The collection provides a good sampling of Pinker's range of interests, as well as tracking his intellectual development over the years. (An annoying feature of the book is that readers do not learn of the time or place of publication of each article until the end of the book.) It also tracks the development of his writing style. The first article in the collection, titled "Formal Models of Language Learning," is a long and, indeed, formal discussion of how it is possible for a child to learn language, taking the reader through the intricacies of formal grammars, the Chomsky hierarchy, Gold's theorem, and the like, and illustrating Pinker's flair for clear explanation. But it is heavy going, and one does not yet see his humor or his penchant for the telling anecdote or literary allusion. I also found this article rather dated in the light of

recent developments toward more naturalistic accounts of language learning. Later articles introduce a lighter and more accessible touch.

Those articles on language also reveal a move away from Chomskyan theory and a concern with evolution. The 1990 article "Natural Language and Natural Selection," with Paul Bloom, is the most heavily cited article in the volume. It is a readable and still-relevant challenge to the rather biblical, anti-Darwinian notion of Chomsky and others that language emerged in a single step—the "great leap forward," to quote Chomsky (2007, p. 3), that made our species unique. As is well known, discussion of the evolution of language was banned by the Linguistic Society of Paris in 1866, shortly after the 1859 publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and the ban seems to have persisted well into the 20th century. Pinker and Bloom's article was perhaps the main spike that let the genie out of the bottle, and the evolution of language is one of the major issues of our time.

Pinker's early articles were not all on language. One early article provides a clever computational account of how mental imagery might work, a topic that was much in contention in the 1980s. This potentially important article might well have escaped notice, as it first appeared in an edited book, which I fear is a medium that seems to benefit publishers more than readers. A later article, written with Michael J. Tarr, deals with how we recognize rotated objects. This is an elegant empirical offering, and one of two samples of what Pinker calls his *empirical oeuvre*, but it is not the last word on object recognition.

Toward the end of the book, readers encounter Pinker in more entertaining mode in an article with the rather unprepossessing title "Rationales for Indirect Speech," although he graciously credits coauthor James Lee with a couple of the literary allusions. This is the second of Pinker's empirical oeuvre to appear in the book and his only attempt to apply evolutionary ideas to a research problem, that of why people so often fail to say what they mean. Instead, we fill our conversation with innuendo, euphemism, empty politeness, or "engineered conviviality" (p. 302). The article was originally published in the prestigious *Psychological Review*, normally a rather austere repository. If an anonymous referee made that one worse, it must have been a cracker to begin with.

Moving through the book, Pinker's topics become more general, touching on broad questions of mind and evolution—or, as he puts it in his introduction to the final article, his "Theory of Everything" (p. 349). That last article, called "The Cognitive Niche," was written in 2009, the year of the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin. It draws on evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, anthropology, and genetics, with an unexpected aside on the intelligence of octopuses. But although that chapter seems to sum up the current state of Pinkerdom, we already know that it is not his last word. This collection was compiled before his most recent book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), in which he made the rather surprising but well-documented claim that human violence has declined over time.

Pinker is a rarity among academic psychologists not only as a stylish writer, but also as a profound thinker with an ability to grasp the major issues of human nature and human evolution. *Language, Cognition, and Human Nature: Selected Articles* is as good an introduction as any into the range and depth of his thinking and will have general appeal beyond an academic readership.

## References

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