

LANGUAGE, COGNITION AND HUMAN NATURE: SELECTED ARTICLES

STEVEN PINKER

Oxford: Oxford University Press
378 pages (\$29.95 hardback)
ISBN: 978-0-19-932874-1(hardback)

Language, Cognition and Human Nature is a collection of essays by one of the most pre-eminent psychologists working in the field of language and human cognition. Steven Pinker is Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University and a well-known popular writer on topics relating to language and human nature. He conducts research on language and cognition, writes for national publications including the *New York Times*, *Time* and *The New Republic*, and is the author of eight books, the most notable including *The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works*, *Words and Rules*, *The Blank Slate*, *The Stuff of Thought*, and, more recently, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. He has won awards from the *American Psychological Association*, the *National Academy of Sciences*, the *Royal Institution*, the *Cognitive Neuroscience Society* and the *American Humanist Association*. He is thus one of the foremost public intellectuals in Anglo-American society today.

Pinker's research explores the workings of language and its connections to cognition, perception, social relationships, child development, human evolution and theories of human nature. This collection brings together Pinker's most significant scholarly work across his considerable 30 year academic career, representing the first time that the full scope of his work has been compiled within a single volume. Each section either outlines a single major theory, including his computational learning theory and his critique of the connectionist model of the acquisition of past tense, or else takes up an argument with another prominent scholar in the field. Stephen Jay Gould, Noam Chomsky and Richard Dawkins all feature prominently in the collection and thus Pinker's ideas are usefully placed in context aside other notable intellectuals of our time.

Pinker's career in the psychology of language has been diverse and expansive. This diversity is faithfully reflected in this collection. The book includes Pinker's work on language development (including the meaning and uses of verbs, the logic of innuendo and euphemism and the evolution of language cognition), as well as his research on human cognition (e.g. mental imagery, the recognition of shapes, the computational architecture of the mind) and, finally, Pinker's thoughts on the nature-nurture debate. Overall, it is highly representational of the core of Pinker's thought and provides a good overview of Pinker's career to date.

The book is intended as both an introduction to Pinker's thought for the curious newcomer, as well as providing a symposium of his most influential writings for the more seasoned Pinker enthusiast. The collection also includes an introduction by Pinker in which he discusses his books and intellectual career to date. In that regards, it is both useful and interesting to read Pinker's own reflections on his body of work.

Overall, the range of topics is broad enough to maintain interest, but not too diverse so as to lose coherence. It is thus an interesting and compelling read. However, I am not sure whether the book would be suitable for someone coming to Pinker for the first time. For example, some of the writings, particular the earlier works, are not exactly accessible to the lay person. These writings reference the broader intellectual backdrop of the fields in which the ideas are embedded and so presume some prior familiarity with the debates in the field. As Pinker's intellectual interests span several disciplines and numerous topics, it is thus likely the newcomer will be overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of ideas on offer.

On the other hand, I'm not sure the most established Pinker reader would necessarily find this book informative either. Snapshots of his major works are presented in relative isolation to the body of work from which they have been taken, giving a somewhat clipped feel to the individual chapters. It is thus unlikely to satisfy someone who wishes to trace the nuances of Pinker's research and theory on a particular topic.

The book is structured chronologically, from Pinker's earlier research on language acquisition, to his more recent work on indirect speech and meta-theories of human cognition. Whilst this format has intuitive appeal (it allows the reader, for example, to trace the development of this thinking), it does not really help the reader follow the development of Pinker's thought over time within a particular field. It thus may have been better to organise the sections chronologically according to particular themes or subjects.

Despite these criticisms, I enjoyed reading the book. As someone fairly new to Pinker's work the book both helped me to appreciate his impact on the discipline of psychology and to inspire me to read more of his works.

*Reviewed by Dr Simon Clarke,
Division of Rehabilitation and Ageing,
University Of Nottingham*