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Why Are We the Way We Are? Renowned Psychologist Explains in Lawrence University Convocation

Posted on: January 8th, 2004 by Rick Peterson

Acclaimed author and cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, whose views on the role of biology in determining human behavior has produced best selling books and raised scientific eyebrows, discusses the concept of nature vs. nurture Tuesday, Jan. 20 in a Lawrence University convocation. Pinker presents “The Blank Slate” at 11:10 a.m. in the Lawrence Memorial Chapel. He also will conduct a question and-answer session at 2 p.m. in Riverview Lounge of the Lawrence Memorial Union.

Widely acknowledged as one of the world’s leading experts on the workings of the human mind, Pinker sparked widespread debate with his latest book, “The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature,” a Pulitzer Prize finalist for nonfiction in 2003 and recipient of the American Psychological Association’s William James Book Prize and the Eleanor Maccoby Book Award.

In “The Blank Slate,” he explores why what he says is the extreme position — that cultural and environmental influences are everything — is so often seen as moderate and the moderate position — that human behavior is innate — is seen as extreme. According to Pinker, the brain at birth is not simply a blank slate but a genetic history of humankind.

As an experimental psychologist, Pinker’s early interests focused on visual cognition and language, particularly language development in children. In 1994, he published the first of his four books, “The Language Instinct,” in which he made the case that language is a biological adaptation. The New York Times Book Review included it on its Editor’s Choice list of the 10 best books

of that year.

In 1997, Pinker explained how people think, feel, laugh, question and enjoy in his second book, “How the Mind Works,” which became a best-seller, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and was named one of the 10 best books of the decade by Amazon.com. Two years later, he published “Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language,” which chronicles his research on regular and irregular verbs as a way of explaining how human language works.

A native of Montreal, where he earned his undergraduate degree at McGill University, Pinker, 49, has spent much of his academic career bouncing between the psychology departments of Harvard University, where he earned his doctorate, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he conducted a postdoctoral fellowship. After a year of teaching at Harvard, he returned to MIT in 1982, where he remained until last year, returning to Harvard as the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology.

In addition to his numerous book awards, Pinker has been named one of the “100 Americans for the Next Century” by Newsweek magazine and been a recipient of the National Academy of Sciences’ Troland Award and the American Academy of Achievement’s Golden Plate Award.