

Five Best

By STEVEN PINKER

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### 1. The Principles of Psychology

By William James

1890

You'd think that a subject as rich as human nature would inspire a cornucopia of great science writing. But it's easier to find readable masterpieces from fields like mathematics and evolution than it is from scientific psychology. Still, a few works endure that are both intellectually meaty and written with panache. William James's "The Principles of Psychology," for instance, has stood the test of time. In this two-volume work of more than 1,000 pages, he shows how humans are at once governed by habits of mind and emotion but also free to act as they see fit. James is the Mark Twain of psychology, fun to read and a source of zingy quotes for every occasion. "To the broody hen the notion would probably seem monstrous that there should be a creature in the world to whom a nestful of eggs was not the utterly fascinating and precious and never-to-be-too-much-sat-upon object which it is to her."

### 2. The Strategy of Conflict

By Thomas C. Schelling

Harvard, 1960

Only three years ago Thomas C. Schelling won the Nobel Prize in economics, but he has long been admired for a book that is more than four decades old. "The Strategy of Conflict" is not so much on human nature itself as it is on the rules of engagement that govern rational social creatures. But it introduced dozens of ideas on culture, emotion, conflict and communication that we are still in the early stages of exploring. Why is it sometimes advantageous to be an irrational hothead? Why do negotiators often split the difference between their positions or settle on a round number? Why do people use innuendo rather than blurting out what they mean? Other writers, including me, have addressed these topics in recent years, but Schelling had the ideas first.

### 3. Yanomamö

By Napoleon A. Chagnon

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968

To understand human nature, first understand the conditions that prevailed during most of human evolution, before the appearance of agriculture, cities and government.

"Yanomamö," Napoleon A. Chagnon's summation of his 30 years among the "fierce people" of the Amazon rainforest, is vividly (and often humorously) written and packed with implications for human nature. For one, he rebuts the idea that aboriginal people would live in peace and harmony if just left alone by the modern world; violence, Chagnon shows, is endemic to the Yanomamö. His book is a courageous work, both

physically (the Yanomamö nearly killed him) and intellectually (fellow anthropologists wanted to kill him).

#### 4. The Nurture Assumption

By Judith Rich Harris

Free Press, 1998

It is one of the great stories of a scientific outsider challenging an entrenched dogma: A New Jersey grandmother uses genetics, ethnography and child-development studies to show that peer groups play a much more decisive role than parents in shaping children's intelligence and personality. At first, the thesis of "The Nurture Assumption" seems shockingly wrong. But Judith Rich Harris builds a convincing case -- so much so, in fact, that I gladly wrote the book's foreword. Among the treats are a devastating critique of much research in child psychology, an eye-opening analysis of why schools fail and an uncommonly wise answer to the inevitable question: So you're saying it doesn't matter how I treat my child?

#### 5. Words and Things

By Roger Brown

Free Press, 1958

No list of books on human nature would be complete without one on language, and this classic is still a delight half a century after it was written. Roger Brown discusses, among other things, the influence of language on thought, the evolution of speech and the symbolism in sound -- why, for instance, words like "cantankerous" and "mellifluous" seem to sound like what they refer to. Roger was my graduate-school adviser, and in an obituary after his death in 1997 I wrote: "His position at Harvard was known as 'The John Lindsley Professor of Psychology in Memory of William James,' and Roger does call to mind William James, for he was perhaps the best writer in psychology since James himself."

Mr. Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, is the author of several books, including "How the Mind Works" and, most recently, "The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature."