

Symposium

The Evolution of Human Nature

Biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and philosophers are increasingly looking to Darwinian explanations for the universal features of human nature and society—from art to morality, from war to politics. In this symposium, four authors examine the merits and shortcomings of these evolutionary theories. Randal R. Hendrickson reviews Steven Pinker’s latest book on the decline of violence and questions Pinker’s uncritical faith in reason. Micah Mattix looks at recent books that seek to account for art and aesthetics in evolutionary terms. Whitley Kaufman challenges E. O. Wilson’s attempts to ground ethics in evolutionary biology. And Peter Augustine Lawler argues that evolutionary psychology, rightly understood, reinforces the conservative lesson that we are not merely autonomous individuals but also social and relational beings.

Swords into Syllogisms

Randal R. Hendrickson

Don’t be fooled by the nightly news: we are living in the most peaceful era known to man. This is the good tidings brought by Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker in his latest book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. His attempt to explain the decline in the violence that punctuated most of human history amounts to a remarkably comprehensive, even entertaining, work that is at turns illuminating and confounding.

Pinker is not neutral on the moral character of the developments that distinguish what he considers our enlightened present from our barbaric past. He wants his book to help its readers better appreciate “modernity,” which is marked by “the erosion of family, tribe, tradition, and religion by the forces of individualism, cosmopolitanism, reason, and science.” These developments are all positive by his lights, but he knows that not everyone will agree. Convincing the holdouts seems to require a big and varied book: *The Better Angels of Our Nature* spans eight hundred pages, with 114 figures and works cited through thirty-odd pages of bibliography.

Trained as an experimental psychologist, Pinker is known for his books on language and mind. Although his new book draws on a wealth

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of disciplines and their subfields, his perspective and ideas are heavily influenced by the field of evolutionary psychology, for which he is a leading spokesman and popularizer.

The title of the book, Pinker explains, refers to the aspects of the mind that give us the ability to live peaceably together:

The mind is a complex system of cognitive and emotional faculties implemented in the brain which owe their basic design to the processes of evolution. Some of these faculties incline us toward various kinds of violence. Others—"the better angels of our nature," in Abraham Lincoln's words—incline us toward cooperation and peace. The way to explain the decline of violence is to identify the changes in our cultural and material milieu that have given our peaceable motives the upper hand.

While the reference to "better angels" is drawn from Lincoln's First Inaugural, the cover of Pinker's book features a different angel. There we see Rembrandt's masterful 1635 depiction of Abraham's divine order to sacrifice his son. Isaac is bound atop a rustic altar, his face obscured by the heavy hand that presses his head to the wood. The father raises a blade meant for the son's throat—but now an angel intervenes and stays Abraham's hand. Rembrandt leaves us with the knife just loosed from its grasp. So here we have an angel, an *outside* force, preventing an act of violence ordered by God.

The anguish alive in Rembrandt's painting speaks to the strangeness of an episode that those who take it seriously have struggled to understand. To Pinker, it's an example of appalling violence in the name of religion and in keeping with his thesis that resistance to such violence comes from within us rather than without. The angel of our nature, not the angel of God, clenches our wrist to avert the blow.

Pinker, then, does not subscribe to a view of man as the plastic being, matter to be molded into whatever form from the outside. And though he is an evolutionary psychologist, his argument for the decline in violence does not depend on natural selection or behavioral genetics. The good things that he reports are too recent to be attributed to changes in our evolved biology. No, as he argued in his earlier book, *The Blank Slate* (2002), human nature is what it was, and it contains ugly things with

The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined

By Steven Pinker

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ugly tendencies. But none of this is to say that human nature cannot be, in effect, manipulated toward benevolence from the outside.

It is from this perspective that Pinker sets out to explore “how our history has engaged our psychology.” He means to “identify exogenous forces that have engaged our mental faculties...and that thereby can be said to have caused the declines in violence.” The effort takes the form of a story about “six trends, five inner demons, four better angels, and five historical forces.” That sounds complicated, and it is. The demons are: dominance, revenge, “predatory or instrumental violence,” sadism, and ideology. The angels are empathy, self-control, “the moral sense,” and reason. Demons outnumber angels, but neither does much without a nudge from the outside forces for peace that emerged in the practical and intellectual realms: cosmopolitanism, “feminization,” commerce, “Leviathan” (that is, the power of the state to discourage and defuse violence), and what he calls “the escalator of reason.”

The engagement of these historical forces with human psychology is tracked through the “six trends” that take up the bulk of the book, with a chapter devoted to each: the Pacification Process, or humanity’s transition from hunting, gathering, and roving hordes to the first agricultural societies; the Civilizing Process, marked by a terrific drop in the homicide rate between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century and sparked by the consolidation of fiefdoms into kingdoms of centralized authority in Europe; the Humanitarian Revolution, a move away from institutionalized cruelty prompted by the Enlightenment thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the Long Peace, the “blessed” post-World War II moment in which great and developed states no longer warred with one another; the New Peace, a decline in all sorts of organized violence since the end of the Cold War; and the Rights Revolutions, a trend to increased revulsion at smaller-scale forms of violence and repression against ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, children, and animals.

Better Angels is an admirably ambitious work whose basic claim is difficult to refute. Against the waves of numbers Pinker provides, who would deny that violence of all kinds has declined more or less steadily over millennia? It is rather Pinker’s interpretation of the numbers that might in places give one pause. In a spaghetti of historical forces and human tendencies, it should be difficult to establish more than tantalizing correlations. But Pinker is bolder than that. The book’s subtitle—*Why Violence Has Declined*—isn’t put in the form of a question; it promises to identify causes. But these are sparse and disputable. Most disputable, perhaps, is his central claim that a “smarter world is a less violent world.” Reason is

the leading cause for peace, and its historical and evolutionary march leads almost necessarily to governments informed by modern principles—the principles of the Enlightenment and classical liberalism.

Convincing the Skeptics

One might think the timing bad. *The Better Angels of our Nature* alighted on bookstore shelves in late 2011, just as the Arab Spring threatened darkest winter—with a military state ready to fill the gap left by the dictator deposed in Egypt and a tyrant in Syria thinking it better to put up a fight and murder his own. Still another, the self-anointed King of Kings of Africa, pushed back, too, promising to bathe his people in blood. He fared (so far) the worst of the three: witness the video clips of his captors posing with the corpse. And surely, if an author wants to celebrate a moment of unprecedented peace, the American president does him no favors when he orders the assassination of an American citizen overseas: death by drone, a marvelous piece of technology, a product of the science and reason whose spread is said to be largely responsible for the great good fortune of the human species to have made it to this most peaceful era. Even forgetting all of these things, one who has thought of the twentieth century's wars and unspeakable human degradation might not be so sanguine.

Other apparently troubling counterexamples abound, and Pinker anticipates the objections that spring from them. He treats these objections in two ways. On the one hand, he notes that, by a mental quirk, we are reluctant to see the present for the remarkably peaceful moment it is: “The human mind tends to estimate the probability of an event from the ease with which it can recall examples,” and if our televisions are going to show us deaths, they’ll show us the violent kind, which are exceptional but never in short supply, rather than the usual kind, which are uninteresting. How can we not think we live in a most violent age when our media deliver us image after bloody image? But if you understand this tendency to miscalculate threats, Pinker says, perhaps you’ll think again before bemoaning our present troubles.

Pinker’s other answer to those who doubt we are living in especially pacific times is to switch us from absolutes to relatives in our accounting. Yes, says Pinker, millions died violent deaths in the twentieth century, but that was only a relatively small fraction of the world population. This point is indisputable, but is it meaningful? If we want to study and measure the history of violence merely by the untimely dead, then Pinker’s approach is the right one. Yet he also wants to rally us to a cause—a

task hard enough for someone reporting *good* news—and those with Auschwitz still on their minds probably will not be much moved by learning that, once the figures are adjusted for world population, the Mongols cut down a larger proportion of humanity than did the Nazis.

Though in both modes Pinker is presenting a decline in violence, the two aims—to convince with graphs of body counts measured in relative numbers and to succeed in proselytizing the triumph of modernity—are somewhat at odds, or speak to two audiences. Some will, and should, appreciate the numbers. But an ordinary individual who longs for the past in the face of apparent present disarray is a tougher sell. Indeed, Pinker means especially to move the latter sort of reader, who he says holds a “loathing of modernity” that is both unhealthy and unwise, and who needs to be convinced that the decline in violence is real, and “may be the most important thing that has ever happened in human history.”

The nostalgic, Pinker explains, have always had a “moral card” to play, which calls to mind peaceful days gone by, a time before civilization poisoned us. The task of his first chapter is to disabuse us of our prejudice against the present and to indicate how we are ever better than our forebears. There are the arrowheads found lodged in the remains of our prehistoric ancestors (so much for the “noble savage”). There are the stories of divine wrath from the Old Testament. There are the grisly Greek and Roman traditions. There are the medieval knights. And let’s not forget the old children’s literature, such as the fables of the Brothers Grimm—“grim fairy tales indeed.”

Pinker’s originality here consists not in telling us what he knows we already know but in bringing these diverse portraits of violence together for display in a single gallery. The exhibition reminds us that violence runs deep in our natural history and in our sacred and beloved texts, and his presentation suggests that we prefer not to face the facts. We know that there are ugly things at work in the formative pieces of our tradition, but we are inclined to neglect them in favor of the beautiful.

Among his favorite examples are religious ones. We get the irreverent gloss on the Old Testament, with its rape, pillage, and most inhumane law of nations. Modern Jews manage somehow to pick and choose; they tend to ignore all the violence divinely sanctioned in the Hebrew Bible and seek solace in other texts, such as the Talmud. Christians do it too with the New Testament, featuring God’s more sensitive Son, who commanded people to stop taking eyes and start turning cheeks. Even so, Pinker hastens to remind us that the Bible is fiction, in company with the tales of knight errantry of Arthurian legend, and of Mother Goose and

the Brothers Grimm. But like these last, or like the epics of Homer, the fictions reflect a blood-soaked reality.

Religion as a ‘Demon’

If you think he means to “impugn” the believers among us, says Pinker, then you’ve missed the point. As a humanist of sorts, Pinker says the faithful are indeed good—but this *in spite* rather than *because* of their religious texts. Though in their temples and churches they mouth ancient beliefs, “when it comes to their actions, they respect modern norms of nonviolence and toleration.” This is a “benevolent hypocrisy for which we should all be grateful.”

In short, religion is the great embodiment of dogmatism—a dam against the rush of the free and open inquiry responsible for humanity’s progress away from violence. Pinker follows Thomas Hobbes, the great wordsmith who dubbed religion “fear of power invisible, feigned by the mind, or imagined from tales publicly allowed.” Though he sets himself apart from the assertive atheism of Christopher Hitchens, who he thinks was wrong to claim that religion “poisons everything,” Pinker shows a certain relish for uncovering the blood sport contained in sacred texts, and classifies religion under “ideology,” one of the five inner demons. While even the Vatican has recognized that religion has often been the source of great harms, Pinker does too little to acknowledge that many of the movements toward peace that he admires have been religious at their origins and cores. If these points are insignificant and irrelevant (and they might be), he should say so. More generally, Pinker’s approach to religion is mistaken at two related levels—one scholarly, the other rhetorical.

Pinker’s stated aim is to persuade a wide audience that he knows to be religious. But his approach to the Biblical text—which he has elsewhere dismissed as “an Iron Age tribal document”—is the picture of an author trying to persuade with a hammer. If, moreover, he is correct that decent believers neglect the morally abhorrent aspects of the Bible for its more socially friendly points of guidance, then why must he repeatedly remind them of the atrocities they seem capable of regarding critically as stories rather than commands? If this is so, haven’t modern principles already won?

Even as he reveals to us the believer’s “benevolent hypocrisy” with regard to the Bible, Pinker himself cherry-picks from among his favorite philosophers. Were he to have followed such thinkers as Darwin, Hume, and even Tocqueville more closely, he might have taken a more generous view of the support offered to the natural moral sentiments by the

religious teachings and impulses he disparages. This would not only have been a better strategy of persuasion, but a good opportunity to answer the objections of scholars who claim that Pinker's commitment to such values as democracy, human rights, and feminism is groundless and irrational given his theoretical commitments, in particular his avowed Darwinism—a point Robert Kraynak has raised against Pinker in these pages (see “Justice without Foundations,” Summer 2011). Yet Darwin himself was friendlier to religion than Kraynak acknowledges and seems to have recognized the moral support provided by religious experience to natural morality and the rights related to it. Oddly enough, one would have to dig to gather as much from Pinker's book.

Becoming Civilized

In any event, religion as the bogeyman is nothing new. The more interesting question is what positive forces enabled our advance from Iron Age tribal mores, as it were, up to the present peace. How to explain why, for instance, the homicide rate declined, against expectations, as people moved into big and bustling cities—why “as Europe became more urban, cosmopolitan, commercial, industrialized, and secular, it got safer and safer”? Here Pinker describes the Civilizing Process, a theory and term taken from the sociologist Norbert Elias, who in the 1930s undertook a fascinating study of the transformation over the past millennium of Europeans' attitudes towards acceptable behavior regarding the body—from table manners to bodily functions to sexual practices and more. The study shows that behaviors now thought revolting were once commonplace; at some point they were reined in by a process that made them shameful and encouraged in human beings some self-control. Stricter standards began at the top and then trickled down to ordinary folk. Court etiquette caught on, and Emily Post's forebears got their start, as manuals for proper behavior began to proliferate; no less a thinker than Erasmus took up the task with his widely read “On Civility in Children.” The Dutchman taught that a boy becomes a man when he learns to control his appetites and to think of those around him, who would prefer him to wield his steak knife in a nonthreatening way.

Whether it be eating the right way at table, keeping sex private, or blowing one's nose into a kerchief, good behavior depended for its success on another development. Etiquette manuals are social texts for social behavior; they need behind them the clout of the political. Rules must be enforced, and rules are announced by a state, or a ruler of a state who

insists under threat of punishment that you follow them. It is the consolidation of baronies and fiefdoms—with so many conflicting and troublesome centers of authority—into centralized kingdoms that brought the great change, the Civilizing Process, to Europe.

To this recap of Elias's work, Pinker now adds a consideration of commerce as a civilizing force—a bit of Enlightenment thinking in the vein of Montesquieu, Hume, and Smith, confirmed by more recent studies in anthropology, biology, and criminology, and repeated here in *Better Angels* by a psychologist who regrets that his peers haven't found the gentle-commerce thesis sufficiently appealing for testing in the lab. Why does commerce, or trade, incline to peace? To put it simply, when you decide to trade your surplus goods with others rather than simply feed yourself from your supply, you see the world differently; you see *others* differently: this man, who buys my beef or supplies my wheat, is worth more to me alive than dead. I have an interest in his being alive. Indeed, I have an interest in not offending him too grossly. Trade, then, is a positive-sum game.

But on the forms of commerce that play to our demons, Pinker is all but silent. The colonialism of the newly civilized Europeans—surely a commercial activity, and often justified in enlightened terms of bringing civilization to untamed locales—is hardly mentioned. Such economic activities as sweatshops or the sex trade might call the gentleness of gentle commerce into question. True, these are likely exceptions, and from time to time in the book's eight hundred pages, Pinker will touch on the economic motive of exploitation—but without addressing the dark side of commerce directly. And yet the Civilizing Process, he does acknowledge, stalls with a “de-civilizing” process now and again—most obviously with fascism, but also with the increase in violent crime in the 1960s and 1970s, and the dip to lesser but wide-scale barbarity of the century's later decades.

Among the many figures in Pinker's book is a map of the world indicating that the Civilizing Process is bigger and more profound than these twentieth-century misfortunes in human affairs. On display are countries with depths of shade indicating their homicide rates: low in China, Canada, and Western Europe; high in large areas of South America and Africa. Against these numbers, there is America with its high murder rate, a striking exception among developed nations. Here, Pinker suggests that we look at the country not as a whole but as an assembly of regions. With this division, New England, the Pacific Northwest, and others areas near the top of the map look positively European. But the South is a different matter. So the better question to ask, it seems, is not why America is so murderous, but what's wrong with the South.

Southerners now learn that the Civilizing Process never quite reached them. Rather than civilization with its law and police, the South is ordered by a code of honor, which Pinker regards as one of the stupid and violent aspects of our history, tied to the demon of revenge and contrary to the force of feminization.

Despite this and other minor blips, the Civilizing Process laid the groundwork for the Humanitarian Revolution. While the former involved the rise of centralized monarchies that set the stage for new norms and new behaviors, the latter arose as individual thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to reconceive social interaction and the legitimacy of authority. Though the Humanitarian Revolution has its source in an earlier absolutism, it is ultimately cosmopolitan and democratic. Thanks to these Enlightenment thinkers, many practices that were once commonplace—judicial torture, dueling, death to blasphemers, slavery, witch-hunting, bear-baiting, and more—came to be treated with revulsion. The shift was remarkably sudden:

The reason so many violent institutions succumbed within so short a span of time was that the arguments that slew them belong to a coherent philosophy that emerged during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. The ideas of thinkers like Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Locke, David Hume, Mary Astell, Kant, Beccaria, Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, and John Stuart Mill coalesced into a worldview that we can call Enlightenment humanism.

Arguably, these are thinkers with ideas too diverse simply to have “coalesced.” But that’s less important than the “worldview” that Pinker gleans from his intellectual milieu. What is Enlightenment humanism?

Humanism here might be defined by its holding out the possibility of the good life without God. Enlightenment humanism in particular is a reflection of the power of pacifying ideas, a power increased with the moment’s magnificent growth in literacy, letters, and print. Philosophical treatises, journalistic essays, satires, and novels had an unprecedentedly wide audience and so the capacity to effect change. Barbaric practices like burning heretics, drowning witches, and other “superstitious killings” couldn’t stand for long under the force of the new worldview.

Rising Reason

Pinker’s faith in reason, and social science in particular, would perhaps be better placed in their capacities to describe humanity than in their

powers to improve our lot in life. He reports that we are much smarter, and so better, than our predecessors, even our very recent predecessors, whose beliefs were “monstrous” and “stupid.” Indeed, they “can really be considered morally retarded.” Pinker is certain that, as with mathematics and science, human beings were “bound” to outgrow this retardation as they “honed the institutions of knowledge and reason, and purged superstitions and inconsistencies from their systems of belief.”

It would seem, though, that the apparently pacifying effects of reason should be the beginning rather than the end of this discussion. The question is, *why* did rational inquiry lead to a decline in violence? Pinker’s attempt at an answer is curiously gullible, evincing a confidence in reason that’s at once progressive and antiquated:

When a large enough community of free, rational agents confers on how a society should run its affairs, steered by logical consistency and feedback from the world, their consensus will veer in certain directions. Just as we don’t have to explain why molecular biologists discovered that DNA has four bases—given that they were doing their biology properly, and given that DNA really does have four bases, in the long run they could hardly have discovered anything else—we may not have to explain why enlightened thinkers would eventually argue against African slavery, cruel punishments, despotic monarchs, and the execution of witches and heretics. With enough scrutiny by disinterested, rational, and informed thinkers, these practices cannot be justified indefinitely. The universe of ideas, in which one idea entails others, is itself an exogenous force, and once a community of thinkers enters that universe, they will be forced in certain directions regardless of their material surroundings.

The answers that Pinker takes to be the necessary and inevitable outcome of rational inquiry remain the most eternal and vexing questions of philosophy. Enlightenment thinkers began by assuming they could find a universal and independently knowable ethical system—but despite the general consensus in the Western world to put a stop to a variety of cruel practices, we have yet to arrive at a universally agreed-upon moral code, much less at a justification for that code.

The nearest Pinker comes to a plausible insight on the power of rational inquiry is his claim that the rise of a literate and informed public offered people the opportunity for “perspective-taking”—an empathetic function of reason, which lets you look at the world through others’ eyes and realize that they are not so different from you. But Pinker more

asserts than argues that peace is a self-evident conclusion of reason, and there are a number of objections to which he offers only an implicit and weak response.

For one, he neglects the possibility that the rational and moral peak of the Enlightenment was an achievement of reasonable *selfishness* rather than sympathy. Pinker repeatedly invokes the hypotheses of the “escalator of reason” and “the expanding circle” of moral concern—terms taken from the philosopher Peter Singer, who in some ways is his guide to the moral universe. But he does not address the significant Enlightenment works that sought to establish the power of government based on social contract and mutually secured self-interest, as in the works of Locke and Montesquieu.

For the most part, Pinker seems to favor the Scottish Enlightenment, with its emphasis on moral sentiments, over the French variety, whose confidence in the power of rationality to replace outmoded institutions and traditions led so quickly to the Revolution’s monstrous attempts at social engineering (though Pinker disputes this version of events). Though empathy may be among the better angels of our nature, Pinker does acknowledge that its “elasticity” is limited. He should go further and note that, while reason sometimes works with the angel empathy, it sometimes works against it. Consider Heinrich Himmler’s chilling speech to the SS at Poznań, in which he employs cold reason explicitly to overcome his audience’s natural empathy for the European Jewry to be destroyed. Here is reasoning on behalf of cruelty, used to justify oppression and diminish our concern for others—surely not a unique example in human history.

As for the “barbaric practices” of yore, it is a very fine thing that we no longer execute heretics, and the prime movers for the decriminalization of heresy and similar offenses are indeed Pinker’s enlightened and utilitarian heroes. But what of punishments today that may be both rational and inhumane? What if the return to order from the criminal depths of the 1960s and 1970s might be explained less by the return to the older bourgeois norms that Pinker emphasizes than by the increased rates of incarceration—rates which many find uncivilized, or indeed, barbaric?

There is the possibility also that, while democracies are demonstrably less violent than other forms of government, reason itself might not be democratic. Though Pinker tries to save Hobbes from a bad reputation, did the “Monster of Malmesbury” not by his extraordinary ratiocination arrive at political absolutism? Did Pinker’s humane Voltaire not flirt with a version of despotism, even as he railed against inquisitorial systems?

Even Kant—whose vision Pinker finds so enlightened that he dubs the “Long Peace” following World War II a “Kantian Peace”—can be viewed along these lines. As Michel Foucault has argued, in response to the question “What Is Enlightenment?,” Kant implied to Frederick II that reason might be used in service of “rational despotism.” Whatever one thinks of Foucault’s interpretation, the fact remains that reason has a variety of potentially anti-democratic expressions—all the way back to Plato’s notion that philosophers must rule as kings. Democracy requires consent of the many or most, and reason might run another way.

In response to these objections, Pinker would likely begin by clarifying that what he means by reason is more the rise of a sort of intelligence that is a force for peace and sympathetic morality. He cites, for example, certain ostensible moral leaders of the recent past—namely, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Winston Churchill—and points out their jarringly racist attitudes and actions. In suggesting that we are smarter today by virtue of our freedom from the “moral stupidity” of these forebears, he does not mean that we have enjoyed an increase in “general intelligence” but in “abstract reasoning.”

He finds evidence for this steady historical increase in reasoning ability in the studies of James Flynn, who noticed in the early 1980s that the makers of standard IQ tests had to keep resetting the norms for their tests over the years as scores steadily increased (a phenomenon known as the “Flynn Effect”). At face value, the trajectory of scores makes it seem that “a typical person today is smarter than 98 percent of the people in the good old days of 1910,” meaning that a typical person from that age today “would have a mean IQ of 70, which is at the border of mental retardation.” But what Flynn’s study actually shows is that we think in ever more abstract terms—or, as Pinker puts it, that scientific vocabulary eventually enters the bloodstream, and we intuitively understand the meaning of terms that would have been opaque to us in decades past. He argues that the same trend has been occurring in the realm of moral reasoning, creating “a *moral* Flynn Effect.” It is by this effect that the average Joe today, simply by virtue of his living at a later moment, is so morally advanced beyond those benighted twentieth-century statesmen.

The Insufficiency of Reason

Perhaps it is not so clear that cold logic leads necessarily to an expansive version of the Golden Rule. But Pinker hangs his cosmopolitan morality on abstract reasoning because logic seemingly allows no distinction between

“you” and “me.” In keeping with his understanding of modernity as breaking the bonds of tribe, community, and authority, reason demands that I do not favor my own over yours. It follows that reasonable morality, at its fullest, embraces the human family to the neglect of one’s own family. Readers of Peter Singer will be familiar with this kind of thinking. It is the same sort of argument that allows Pinker to account for the existence of rights. How do I know that we members of the human family have rights to life, liberty, and the rest? Because I know that I don’t want others impinging on my own life, liberty, and the rest. Yet Pinker takes too easy a leap from one thing to the other—alighting on a morality that asks too much, and is thus untrue to common moral experience, perhaps even untrue simply.

Pinker’s morality is rational-egalitarian. But is it necessary that a morality rooted in reason be egalitarian? Logic demands only consistency, not equality. Consider, as Gary Gutting of Notre Dame has noted in his critique of Pinker’s book, the logic of an authoritarian morality that says that you, owing to your station in life, may strike ordinary me. As long as you accept that, should our roles be reversed, I may strike you without your striking me in kind, then we are operating under a logically consistent morality. But the morality that Pinker is discussing is one that treats all of humanity as equal—indeed, indistinguishable. Cold reason alone will not get us there. Might sentiment?

The problem with authoritarian morality is not that it is inconsistent, but most of us still sense that it is wrong. The problem with the absolute moral equality of all human beings, meanwhile, is its contrariness to experience—none of us behaves as if we owe our closest friend exactly what we owe a perfect stranger. In both cases, average people would resist the apparent logic of such systems based on what they sense to be right—a point captured in the phrase, “I’d rather be right than consistent.” By ordinary experience, I won’t be blamed for caring for my child more than a starving one in a faraway country—any more than Peter Singer, to borrow one of his own examples, should be blamed for preferring to spend money on his mother’s Alzheimer’s care over sending the funds to Oxfam.

Such cases suggest that the morality Pinker seeks will exhaust reason before reaching truly cosmopolitan heights, and that our own moral feelings will push back against a notion that so elides the distinction between mine and yours. A more realistic line of thought is available in the Scottish philosophers whom Pinker admires, and in Darwin, who built upon their findings. Such thinkers entertained the expansion of a circle of moral concern, but only on the basis of the satisfaction of more immediate concerns—moral and otherwise.

Had Pinker more closely followed their lead, his case for a reasonably expansive morality and the customs and institutions that foster it would be stronger. But to do so would be to suggest that morality has its source more in feeling than in reason, and Pinker won't take that step. His reluctance to do so seems to be born of an almost pious regard for reason. Recall that reason, on his account, is the best of our better angels, as well as the leading historical force that plays to them; it is reason that makes humanity humane, that sets it on an "escalator" that seems only to go up. One might say that Pinker is reason's knight in shining armor. He wouldn't call himself that, of course—knights were violent, like those who worked for Arthur and had a penchant for "grailing," as Twain's Connecticut Yankee called it—but the analogy is apt insofar as Pinker shows a paradoxical unwillingness to put to reason an enlightened critique.

This is not to suggest that Pinker ought to abandon his humanism, or the Enlightenment. Indeed, he has all the right materials to make a very fine defense of the classical liberalism born of it. But he doesn't put those materials to good use, as he refrains from taking steps that would cross the grain of his sensibilities. The same abstract reasoning that leads human beings to Pinker's cosmopolitan morality also leads them, he says, to classical liberalism, the political peak of his history. But his understanding of it, while not entirely off the mark, is rather novel. Classical liberalism, he says, benefits from "feminization"—and indeed, his assertion that "a more feminized world is a more peaceful world" is true in many ways. But Pinker is too quick to dismiss honor, which for him is at the source of so much of the violence that men have caused. Here he runs contrary to the spirit of classical liberalism and its subtler handling of that virtue.

For Pinker, honor is too tightly bound to the values of manliness, which he regards as contrary to peace. To be sure, honor of a certain kind gives rise to all sorts of macho stupidity. But honor is also in some respects the foundation and guardian of classical liberalism. For instance, the writers of the Declaration of Independence, which Pinker admires as a document of the Humanitarian Revolution, pledged their "sacred honor" to uphold its principles. And before them, Montesquieu rethought the concept while preserving the name, transforming honor from a source of much violence and debasement, and the exclusive preserve of a few, to a good owed to all, along with life, liberty, and property. So it is, in some sense, honor that gives life to the right to rebellion affirmed by all the classical liberals, from Locke's "appeal to heaven" to the Founders' bold claims in the Declaration. And honor informs the profound anti-slavery

sentiments expressed in the later works of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Though Pinker admits the need for violence to quash violence—the role of the Leviathan, with its police force and criminal justice system—he says nothing about the spirit that animates that necessary kind of violence. Does there not have to be some notion of honor and resistance to uphold the rights of classical liberalism and of the “Rights Revolutions” that he studies? Indeed, though one would not know it from his discussion of the thing, the very Universal Declaration of Human Rights that got the Rights Revolution rolling itself speaks of rebellion to be sparked by universal “outrage” at “barbarous acts” against humanity. Classical liberalism needs to be defended by more than reason alone. It should not be so difficult to see how a state of peace can, even must, be sustained in part by a spirit of honor rightly understood.

Ever Upward?

Despite these problems, *Better Angels* on the whole is a magnificently bold work, worthy of a wide audience. Given its size and the breadth of topics covered, there is much more in the book that deserves discussion. Pinker’s description of the brain and its involvement in moral reasoning, for instance, is a fascinating, if perhaps insufficiently critical, survey of an important field. But whatever one thinks of the directions he takes, he has offered an invaluable assembly of facts, has given readers much to think about, and has written a work that ought to be engaged. One hopes the book will serve as the impetus for further studies that either show better connections between the trends he has identified or that show us better what to do with them.

The ultimate question, however, is whether Pinker succeeds in making us appreciate modernity as having moved humankind in a “noble direction.” And on this there is reason for doubt. Pinker is certainly correct to suggest that those with romantic longings for yesteryear would, if pressed, resist returning by time machine to an era of life lived in squalor, when individuals were ever under threat of disease, torture, and murder. But to acknowledge this is not to be convinced that, were the same time machine to bring me face-to-face with a sadistic Inquisitor of a bygone era, I could use my superior knowledge and powers of abstract reasoning to shine a light on the narrowness of his worldview and thereby convince him of the error of his ways. Putting it more simply, Pinker has persuaded me that these were nasty fellows, but not that they were stupid.

What, then, does this book suggest about the trajectory of modernity? Here Pinker is more reserved, citing “gratitude” rather than optimism. And this is somewhat disappointing. After all this, one might hope he would suggest that the free inquiry sparked in the eighteenth century’s republic of letters would carry us to ever more peaceful heights with our own “electronic republic of letters.” Pinker’s hesitation here is reasonable, even if his faith in reason is not.