Strategic Cooperation and the Rise of the Modern World

A review of

The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined

by Steven Pinker


Reviewed by

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Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* is a brilliant analysis of the decline in human violence over the past several centuries and of the social and psychological processes associated with this decline. His sweeping work encompasses the intricacies of the medieval practice of breaking miscreants on the wheel, to dueling vice presidents—one duel with a knowing and willing opponent (Aaron Burr vs. Alexander Hamilton) and one without (Dick Cheney vs. his entourage)—to the brain systems involved in rage and compassion.

At the core are the cost–benefit trade-offs in pursuing one’s goals using strategic aggression, strategic cooperation, or some mixture thereof, and the institutional, social, and
psychological mechanisms that tilt the scale in one direction or the other. In fits and starts and a few regressions, our wisest ancestors created social institutions (e.g., central governments) and helped to shape rational social practices (e.g., rules of law applied without prejudice) that slowly tipped the scale toward strategic cooperation.

Pinker makes clear that this cooperation represents not a suppression of our nature but the accretion of social practices and shifting psychological frames of reference that expand our evolved capacity for reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971). Pinker’s walk down the road to our current place in history is too nuanced for us to address its each and every point, but we will highlight and comment on a few of them.

**Leviathan’s Taming of the Ignoble Savage**

The noble savage is a potentially dangerous myth: Dismantling central governments and related institutions will not usher in utopia but rather a bloodbath. People living in traditional societies today and their and our ancestors are neither angels nor demons but human beings who can pursue their goals aggressively or cooperatively.

Pinker marshals extensive evidence to support Hobbes’s (1651) speculations that in the absence of a central authority (Leviathan), strategic violence is routinely used in pursuit of gain, in the protection of one’s possessions, and for establishing and maintaining one’s reputation and honor (e.g., to avenge the murder of a relative, blood revenge). Before the emergence of the Leviathan or following its collapse, the risk of dying at the hands of another human being spikes.

To be sure, the early emergence of the Leviathan was a bloody affair, with chiefs and kings violently suppressing internal raids and cycles of blood revenge among “their” villages and “subjects.” They did not do so because it was moral but because it was in the king’s best interest: Living subjects produce more wealth to be taxed or appropriated than do dead ones. In fact, once this notion was inside the head of the Leviathan, the ruler and his kin used it with impunity to pursue their reproductive and material interests, at great cost to others (Betzig, 1993). Although people often suffered from the whims of these tyrants, they were less likely to die at the hands of other humans than they were at other times.

Pinker refers to these early steps toward large-scale, centralized political organization as the pacification process. One critical outcome was the emerging division of labor and trade within the realms of kings and other despots. Artisans in a neighboring village who produced a valued commodity that was not easily produced in one’s own village were more valuable alive than dead.

Reciprocal exchange is not new to human nature (Brown, 1991), but long-distance trade within a kingdom is facilitated by a common currency, by rules of law that address conflicts of interest, and finally by the power of the Leviathan to punish those who violate
these laws. Pinker details that these punishments greatly exceeded the gravity of the offense, as with debtors’ prison and hanging for shoplifting, but at the same time notes how commerce contributed to the valuation of others and forced the consideration of their viewpoints, especially those of customers and trading partners.

Elias (1939/2000) conceptualized the civilizing process as the confluence of ideas, including the importance of self-control and social manners, and institutional changes that eventually helped to wrestle the Leviathan away from despot-friendly ideologies and tilted the scale further toward strategic cooperation. Pinker infuses these ideas with those found in Kant’s (1795) *Perpetual Peace* and highlights the critical, transformative ideas that emerged during the European Enlightenment.

Monarchs and other despots were not fond of free thinkers and as a matter of course suppressed ideas that threatened their power. This was where the first critical leg of Kant’s tripod came into play. This leg was built from the emergence of rational, scientific views of the world and society. An abstract, rational analysis of political organizations left little justified room for divine monarchical rule. Classical liberalism (not to be confused with modern liberalism) ushered in the idea that basic rights should be shifted from the Leviathan to the individual: People have inherent rights and should be free to engage in trade, exchanges of ideas, or whatever else they please as long as it is not at the expense of another individual. This ethic is best expressed in democracies.

The second leg of Kant’s tripod was a federation of democracies: not the United Nations, but rules that made strategic cooperation among states a better option than strategic aggression. Enforceable rules that greased mutually beneficial trade within nations also applied to trade between them. Again, long-distance trading partners who produced desirable commodities were more valuable alive than dead, even if they looked different and spoke a different language. Of course, commerce was entirely compatible with conquest and plunder of resources—something European leaders did regularly. The constraints on power built into democracies, however, make this form of strategic aggression a less viable option than strategic cooperation.

The third leg was universal hospitality, the freedom to visit and trade with people in other countries without concern for one’s safety. The rules of law and general beliefs about the rights of others applied not only within one’s own nation but to all others.

Pinker argues that the civilizing process was also aided by the printing press. The associated explosion of books and the ideas contained therein shrank the parochial world of monarchies and made available glimpses into the lives and suffering of those less fortunate than the educated classes. Sympathy and empathy for the plight of the less fortunate combined with a reframing of individual rights and an expansion of the circle of individuals to whom these rights applied fueled legislative reforms and beliefs about other people that rolled through the 19th and 20th centuries, abolishing slavery, child labor, racial segregation, and culminated in the rights movements (for women, children, gay men and lesbians, animals) of the last several decades.
Although Pinker briefly notes that the suppression of polygyny during Europe’s Middle Ages contributed to the decline in violence, we believe it was more pivotal than his consideration implies. When it comes to deadly violence, men were and remain the primary victims and culprits, although waves of violence can wash over whole communities and societies. Intense male-on-male violence is common across species and especially for those in which men physically compete for dominance and priority access to multiple females. For these polygynous species, a few men sire the majority of the next generation while most die without siring a single offspring. In this situation, men either escalate the competitive aggression or consign their genes to oblivion.

As Betzig (1993) described, this motive was fully expressed in the world’s first large-scale civilizations, where “powerful men mate with hundreds of women, pass their power on to a son by one legitimate wife, and take the lives of men who get in their way” (p. 37). Western Europe has a long history of legal monogamy, but in the Middle Ages this existed alongside polygynous matings. The gradual suppression of this dynamic almost certainly shifted the payoffs from violence to cooperation.

As Pinker notes, married men are less prone to violence than are unmarried ones. Legal changes and cultural mores, as emerged in medieval Europe, shifted the incentives such that all men had the prospect of marriage if they bought into society’s legal systems and competed economically and culturally rather than physically (Geary, 2010).

Riding the crest of these changes is the proliferation of democratic republics with built-in divisions of power and constraints on the use of power by heads of state. Democracies not only limit the power wielded within their borders, but they also constrain the use of force beyond them: Democracies may wield considerable military power but do not use the full extent of this power when they engage in war and, as a rule, do not engage in war among themselves. Pinker makes it clear that even in a world of democracies, laying down arms and turning the other cheek are fool’s errands, as dynamics among nations, as among people, are contingent on the relative payoffs of strategic cooperation and strategic aggression.

### Demise of Despots and Dodgeball

After this whirlwind tour of history, Pinker delves into the human mind, specifically, the brain and psychological mechanisms that give rise to aggression, compassion, and our moral sense. We agree with Pinker that emotions such as empathy do not have sufficient reach to explain the decline in violence, although they help. More critical are self-control and the rational application of morality, including a consideration of to whom these moral edicts apply. Pinker tautly describes the advantage of logic in moral reasoning, “As soon as he
says, ‘It’s bad for you to hurt me,’ he’s committed to ‘It’s bad for me to hurt you,’ since logic cannot tell the difference between ‘me’ and ‘you’” (p. 647).

Pinker notes that political correctness is a recent manifestation of this historical trend, adding that it is a small price to pay. We are concerned, however, that current moralistic fads detract from desperately needed analyses, such as that of Pinker, in favor of less-informed and often-irrational self-serving ideas.

The modern-day crusade to rend violence of any kind—physical, psychological, or social—from human affairs has resulted in a hypervigilance that trivializes the critical and important gains that have been made over the span of hundreds of years. Dodgeball is but one example: This once-routine pastime is now banned in many schools, lest it rouse the inner demons of violence and result in internecine mayhem in which Mrs. Smith’s third-graders may swoop down on their unsuspecting lower classman to plunder Capitan America and Hello Kitty lunchboxes.

In short, much of today’s moralizing has pushed beyond the confines of reason. Moral edicts are used to manipulate others or the legal and social systems that society has long suffered to put in place for personal gain, often at the expense of trivializing the real harm they were meant to tame (e.g., equating ogling with rape).

Closing Remarks

Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is a must read, and one that deserves long and thoughtful consideration. The latter is especially important for the modern era’s intellectual public, most of whom live in and have grown up in a world largely sanitized of superstition, perpetual fear of violence to oneself and to one’s loved ones, and premature mortality. Indeed, the current ambivalence—often verging on hostility—toward the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernization is a peculiar fad among many intellectuals. Modern films such as *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* are rife with poignant critiques of suburban decadence and the anomic of the modern world.

Although increasing anonymity, eroding kinship networks, and conspicuous consumerism may contribute to anxiety and depression, it does not follow that the world was a better place in the distant past: It was not. It is important to understand that *Jersey Shore* is not the epitome of human depravity (really) and that today’s teenagers are not regressing into hordes of Huns and Vandals because they play too much *Call of Duty*. The next generation may well be the least violent and the most concerned with human rights and social justice in the history of our species. It is important not to fall victim to historical myopia—life was once nasty, brutish, poor, and short. Pinker has done a great service by reminding us of that fact.
References


