

**Surprise! This is World Peace**  
*The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*  
by Steven Pinker

book reviewed by Michael J. Prival

Steven Pinker has chosen a very difficult task. First, he wants to convince us, so soon after the horrendously murderous twentieth century, that human violence is in a very long-term decline and we live in the least violent period of human history. Only then does he get to the real point of his book, which is even more challenging – explaining to us why this is true.

Pinker understands that those of us who are not experts in the field almost universally believe that violence has grown worse over time. Therefore, much of his hefty book is devoted to explanations and statistics demonstrating why almost all of us are wrong. He does admit, of course, that World War II resulted in more deaths than any other event in human history – 55 million – but he points out that it ranks only ninth in the percentage of the world population killed. Many of the causes that rank higher are totally unknown to most of us today, such as the number one killer, the An Lushan Revolt in China in the eighth century in which an estimated 36 million died (almost eight times the percentage of people alive at the time as compared to World War II).

The best available data from prehistoric archaeological sites and from contemporary hunter-gatherers indicates average death rates from warfare at least five times higher than during the two bloodiest periods of European history: the seventeenth century (which included the carnage of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants) and the first half of the twentieth century. This observation points to Pinker's first major factor in reducing war-related violence, which is, somewhat counterintuitively, the development of nation-states. For while nation-states may fight each other, they also strive to suppress violence of all kinds among their inhabitants. The consolidation of power into larger nation-states has also contributed to peace by decreasing the opportunities for warfare between such powers.

In past times, people had to fear death not only from war but also, to a degree unfathomable to us, from their neighbors. Pinker shows that murder rates in England and other European countries in the fourteenth century were perhaps one-tenth the average rates in non-state societies but thirty to fifty times the current levels. Pinker does his best to include places outside of Europe and North America in his analyses, though historical crime data from such areas are not generally available. He concludes that the trends he is describing are global. For example, worldwide homicide rates are now only a fraction of those encountered in Europe a few hundred years ago.

Pinker describes a wide variety of practices so repulsive that it's hard to believe they were commonplace not so long ago. These include torturing and killing cats as public entertainment, cutting another person's nose off out of anger, burning those accused as witches, execution for such trivial offenses as robbing a rabbit warren or cutting down a tree, and horrifying types of legally invoked torture. Knowing that we are most viscerally affected by the violence of our own time, Pinker strives to convince us with statistics and with specific examples that contemporary experience pales in comparison to the violence of the past. One example that sticks in the mind was the practice of requiring people to pay to have spiked iron collars removed from an imprisoned family member's neck.

Although the decline of violence should be of interest to virtually everyone, the explanation of this decline is of special interest to us as humanists whose outlook is rooted in the Enlightenment of seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. For Pinker, major and essential causes of the decline of violence in recent centuries are the expanding use of reason and the flourishing of humanism that characterized the Enlightenment. Of course, the word humanism is used by Pinker in a broad historical sense, embracing the increasing concern with the human condition that signaled the end of the Middle Ages and the start of the modern era. But Pinker is also a humanist in our more restrictive sense of finding values and meaning in human experience without reference to supernatural power. He does not shy away from clearly explaining that the decline of violence has resulted, in part, from the triumph of human reason over traditional religious impulses. (He also peppers his books with occasional Yiddishisms and stories about his Jewish upbringing, which let us know exactly what flavor of secular humanist he is.)

The institution of slavery, the use of capital and corporal punishments, and the widespread, open, and generally accepted use of torture were almost, if not completely, abolished through efforts rooted in the Enlightenment. It was the

Enlightenment, says Pinker, that caused people to develop sympathy for those who were not personally close to them through family or other in-group bonds. It seems strange to us today that “sympathetic empathy” for strangers apparently didn’t exist to a significant extent prior to that time. Pinker makes the case that thinkers, writers, and even philosophers convinced people that they should be concerned about the welfare of strangers with whom they did not share family, religious, or ethnic ties. One interesting example is the increased popularity of novels in the eighteenth century, which led to a broadening of empathetic feelings among readers. Pinker’s explanations for the decrease in violence are by no means simplistic, however; he delves into a wide variety of causes, including enhanced communication, the growth of commerce and democracy, urbanization, and even people getting smarter!

Pinker presents an unabashedly optimistic view of human history in which humanitarian concerns and legal rights have been extended to more and more groups (and even animals!) and rates of both interpersonal violence and battlefield deaths have sharply declined. The picture he presents is in such sharp contrast with the widespread notion that we are on the brink of disaster that it could easily be dismissed as fantasy were Pinker not a supremely thoughtful, knowledgeable, and intelligent person guided by reason, rather than by ideology of any sort. In fact, those of us who have read other books of his will be surprised at how, somewhat in contrast to his earlier works, he now emphasizes the pliability of the human mind. As a prominent advocate of evolutionary psychology, Pinker has always insisted that there *is* such a thing as human nature, and its roots in our evolutionary past make our inherited traits flexible only to a limited degree. Now he presents evidence that intelligence (not just knowledge, but conceptual thinking ability) has been increasing, and this human improvement is not genetically based but rather attributable to increasing education and exposure to abstract concepts. This enhanced ability to think conceptually, he says, helps to foster a more peaceful world.

According to Pinker, the past is a foreign country, difficult for us to understand and extremely violent. He claims that what is new and important about genocide in the twentieth century is not so much the scale on which it occurred but rather that for the first time in history it came to be seen as bad. In this light, Holocaust denial can be seen as a sign of moral progress; until recently, perpetrators of genocide and their allies boasted of the deed. On a much smaller scale, the story of the killing spree on a Norwegian island in 2011, while evoking horror, also has within it some hopeful signs. In the past the consequences of such an event would have included

violent retribution, not only against the killer, but also against his family and any real or imagined allies, which would likely have led, in turn, to further cycles of killing and retribution.

Pinker understands well the arguments against his rosy scenario – from the potential for nuclear annihilation to the possibility of protracted wars resulting from the effects of global warming. He presents counter arguments that may not be completely convincing to all but at least let us see that predictions of a brighter future are not completely unreasonable. The “Long Peace”– the current six decades without wars between major powers, something unprecedented since such powers came into existence five hundred years ago – represents for Pinker not a temporary lull in an endless stream of violence but rather a reasonably stable reframing of the human condition. Recent and ongoing conflicts, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as various civil wars around the world, may be tragedies for those involved but numerically pale in the face of past centuries of bloodshed resulting from repeated wars between major powers.

This is a substantial book, encompassing not only history, philosophy, and brain anatomy and function, but also popular culture – from a 1950s advertisement showing a man spanking his wife for buying the wrong brand of coffee to the peace and love lyrics that pervaded the 1960s. It is an important book, forcing us to see that the ideas we humanists foster – devotion to reason and human compassion – are not just lofty ideals but also potent forces in shaping world history.

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This review is reprinted with the author’s permission from the journal Humanistic Judaism (Volume XXXX, Number 2-3, Spring/Summer 2012, pages 39-41), published by the Society for Humanistic Judaism, 28611 W 12 Mile Road, Farmington Hills, MI 48334, [www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org). Subscriptions to the journal and individual issues are available from the Society (<http://www.shj.org/store/hj-journal/>).

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