

## **ENLIGHTENMENT NOW**

**The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress**

**Author: Steven Pinker**

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The bomb? The plague? Trump? Not to worry; things are getting better. So writes eternal optimist Pinker (Psychology/Harvard Univ.; *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, 2011, etc.). "Why should I live?" So asked one of the author's students. "Explaining the meaning of life is not the usual job description of a professor of cognitive science," he writes—before gamely proceeding to answer that very question from a variety of stances, all resting on the assumption that life is best endowed with meaning if only we remember our Enlightenment ideals. Those ideals, "products of human reason," hinge on—well, reason, and science, the latter the "refining of reason to understand the world." Against these are what Pinker characterizes as manifestations of delusional thinking, including religious faith and the "hermeneutic parsing of sacred texts," the "suffocating political correctness" on campus, the "disaster of postmodernism" that has devastated humanistic thought, and the "identity-protective cognition" that has made political discourse so soul-killing. Pinker's protestations are progressive, though the academically orthodox will find him an apostate. Just so, his atheism may put him in company with Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, but he would doubtless say that it's the only logical conclusion to come to, and Pascal's wager be damned. In a long, overstuffed, impeccably written text full of interesting tidbits from neuroscience and other disciplines, the author examines the many ways in which Enlightenment ideals have given us lives that our forebears would envy even if gloominess and pessimism are the order of the day—on which he sensibly remarks, "a modicum of anxiety may be the price we pay for the uncertainty of freedom." There's work to be done, of course, from educating the illiterate and innumerate to taking the world's nuclear arsenal down to, ideally, zero, and much else besides. For those inclined to believe that the end is not nigh and who would like to keep up with recent science, this book is a...well, not a godsend, but a gift all the same.