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Steven Pinker: 'A generation has to watch every word . . . It could cripple intellectual life'

Cancel culture is threatening academic freedom, fears Harvard's Steven Pinker. Is that why he's written a defence of rationality, asks Andrew Billen



Steven Pinker: "The idea that you should only believe things that are true is, by human historical standards, deeply weird"

JULIEN FAURE/LEEXTRA/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

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What he is proposing, I say, daring to paraphrase Professor Steven Pinker's new 400-page book to its author, is that society needs to agree to base more of its decisions on rationality. "As wild and crazy and controversial an idea as that sounds, yes," Pinker agrees by Zoom from the University of California, Berkeley, where the experimental cognitive scientist is taking a year's sabbatical from Harvard University.

Pinker, 67 but still wearing his greyish-blond curls at hippy length, is not universally admired. The editor of America's *Current Affairs* magazine called him the world's most annoying man. The philosopher John Gray said his last book was "a parody of Enlightenment thinking at its crudest". What, though, is there not to like about *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters?* Surely appealing for logic cannot be controversial. The problem is that in the age of QAnon, antivax and US election denial, it probably is. What's more, Pinker says, it always has been.

"The idea that you should only believe things that are true is, by human historical standards, deeply weird," he says. For most of human life so much was inexplicable that mankind was content for myths to answer its FAQs. What, Pinker asks, are Christ's miracles but "fake news"? Only since the Enlightenment has evidence really mattered.

So do we live in a boom time for wackos or not? "It's not immediately obvious that there's a boom," he says. "One can't infer from 'there's a lot of stuff now' that 'there's more stuff than there used to be'." US newspaper letters pages from 1890 to 2010 show no increase in the space given to conspiracy theories. "Now they will simply be circulated on Twitter and Facebook."

He admits, however, to becoming increasingly sympathetic to the thought that social media has accelerated their circulation so much that

we are witnessing something new. “I don’t think anyone appreciated this when they were launched, but [these sites] are almost designed to bring

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move us toward objectivity and rationality: science, journalism, democratic government and so on.”

It’s like a continuous popularity contest, isn’t it? “Exactly. Or a notoriety contest.”

Another explanation for the boom, if there is one, is that we live in a society exceptionally divided between the “left” and “right”, not just politically but culturally. Sides interpret facts through the prism of their beliefs, the “myside” bias. On the left there is rigid political correctness; on the right articles of faith such as that the last presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump.

Pinker acknowledges that some unreasonable beliefs hardly matter because so few act on them. He cites the conspiracy theorist who bought into the notion that a pizzeria in Washington was the base for a Hillary Clinton sex-trafficking ring. Rather than call the police, he awarded it a one-star review on Google. Identifying what he calls this fantastical “mythology mindset”, operating well outside someone’s “reality zone”, was an “epiphany” for him.

And it is entertainment, I say. “Calling it entertainment kind of trivialises it. It’s the same mindset that underlies our national myths and religions.

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entertaining, filled with sex and violence.”

Much irrationality is harmful, however. President Biden has accused Covid antivaxers of “killing people” and Pinker agrees. “Oh, absolutely. The misinformation gains a toehold because it harmonises with primitive intuitions that we have. Opposition to vaccination is as old as vaccination.

“Vaccination, after all, is injecting an infectious agent into your body. The concept does have to overcome a natural, intuitive resistance. The people who do overcome it are the people who trust the biomedical establishment. If you don’t trust the biomedical establishment and think it just another corrupt elite, it’s easy to fall back on the natural intuitions of purity and contamination.”

Pinker has been criticised for his optimism, particularly the claim of his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that we are getting richer, living longer and more peaceably (in *Rationality* he writes that he does not believe progress is inevitable, but maintains that “the arc of knowledge is a long one and tends towards rationality”). Yet much of *Rationality* depresses me. It begins hopefully by saying that the ancient San people of the Kalahari have sustained their hunter-gatherer lifestyle through rational thought (rather than just chucking spears at passing

fauna), but the next nine chapters demonstrate how much easier it is to get muddled.

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mins when given the option in a 1 v quiz show (as discussed in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*). False positive results mean that doctors hugely overestimate how likely a woman receiving a positive test for breast cancer is actually to have the disease. I eventually understood Pinker's refutations of the apparently obvious conclusions, but, boy, did they take some rereading. We are, the book maintains, bad at understanding probability, bad at Bayesian reasoning (taking into account prior probability), inept at game theory, at sea when calculating risk and reward, fuzzy at distinguishing between meaningful statistical "signals" and "noise", and prey to con artists (including those in our mind) whose arguments are ad hominem, based on appeals to authority or reliance on straw men.

Rationality seems bloody hard work. "It truly is," he concedes. "It is like anything else our species puts its mind to. We come up with better ways of doing things than what nature gave us."

He finds it "unseemly" to discuss his IQ. He claims that all he knows was that aged ten he was told it exceeded 130. But would the average person with a IQ of 100 understand his book? "I think so. I consider such people among my audience," he says. The better question may be: "Do you enjoy pushing your limits? Do you enjoy brain power in the same way that people enjoy exercise?"

The good news is that we need not rely on our individual brains. We can outsource the work to institutions and professions we trust to be collectively rational. The bad news is that such trust is low and, Pinker believes, our institutions are uninterested in earning it back.

"Science is completely oblivious to that," he says. "I found my fellow scientists, our scientific societies, for example, pretty much parrot the politically correct boiler plate on race, on inequality, on crime. You get no sense from the National Academy of Sciences or *Science* magazine

that these are impartial arbiters of social issues. Their positions are indistinguishable from *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, and this

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them.”

He is a Democrat, but this did not stop 550 academics last year calling on him to be removed as a “distinguished fellow” of the Linguistic Society of America for allegedly minimising racial injustice. Their claim was based on six tweets dating back to 2014, his calling a man who had shot four young muggers on the subway “mild-mannered” in 2011, and a retweet of what later turned out to be an inaccurate paper suggesting the high number of police shootings of black people may not have been caused by the officers’ individual racism. The Linguistic Society refrained from stripping him from his fellowship, but had he feared he would be cancelled?

“Well, I was concerned. I’m in a privileged position, but the charges in that case were self-evidently absurd. I think one article called them ‘forehead-slappingly stupid.’” That nowadays is not necessarily a defence against cancellation.

“But the main thing is the signal of intimidation it sent to people less secure than I am. A generation of post-docs and grad students notice that they have to watch every word, not only for what they say but what someone could twist into something. The danger is it can impose a regime of conformity and self-consciousness that I think, if it was widespread, could cripple intellectual life in academia.”

Aren’t most of us, in everyday life, careful not to antagonise people?

“But it’s now not enough to avoid provocation — and I do avoid provocation — it’s that you have to advance the shibboleths, the slogans, the verbiage, in order to flourish in an academic environment.”

In fact, in the new book Pinker does return to police violence against black people. Statistics, he maintains, do not show that African-Americans are at serious risk of being killed by the police, yet the killing

of George Floyd last spring led to “the sudden adoption of a radical academic doctrine critical race theory”. He says he gave due

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our fear and outrage — is not necessarily proportionate to the “actual human toll” and that applied to 9/11 too.

Would he take the knee? “You mean if I were a football player? I myself, no, I would not take the knee. I’d rather write an op-ed.”

Pinker insists that when writing his book he avoided many “third rails and hot buttons”. They probably included the question of innate gender differences between men and women, an electrified rail he has stepped on before. I assume he does not believe women are less rational than men? “Oh no, and you can probably invert that. Men are susceptible to what’s called competitive distance urination: they have pissing contests and that is a recipe for irrationality.”

So how far is his personal life rational? He says he tries. He does not pay to reduce excesses on insurance policies because the money saved on a claim unlikely to be made will not justify the initial outlay. He wears a helmet when he rides a bike, but probably cycles too much for statistical comfort. He reads newspapers he agrees and disagrees with, and also hostile reviews of his books — although mostly, in pre-Covid days, aboard an aircraft, where he is already uncomfortable, rather than last thing at night. “That’s taking a rational approach to one’s own emotions.”

What of his love life? Divorced twice, he has been married since 2007 to Rebecca Newberg Goldstein, a philosopher and novelist. Did they fall for each other’s minds? “I think that’s true. We certainly fell in love with each other’s words,” he says.

“But there is a paradoxically rational element to love, for just loving someone for the person they are and for it overcoming you involuntarily. We see it in the content of courtship material, like pop songs: *Can’t Help*

Falling in Love; Crazy in Love; Can't Eat, Can't Sleep; I Like the Way You Walk.

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Why you should pick them, it violates a higher-order rationality. If you choose someone for their desirable traits, that means you could dump them for someone with more desirable traits when that person comes along — as inevitably they will.”

I notice that he quotes a Goldstein novel in the book. Can he be sure the passage got there for rational reasons rather than because he loves her? “Yes! This was not just a way of keeping domestic peace — *shalom bayit*, as they say in Hebrew. Not only are we compatible, but I think I owe to her the idea that rationality, per se, is something to celebrate, to valorise, that there’s something heroic about rationality. She’s a philosopher. It’s the kind of thought that occurs more naturally to a philosopher.”

Will the muddled, twittering, unscientific, philosophy-resistant planet go crazy for *Rationality*? Call me irrational, but I truly hope so.

***Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters* by Steven Pinker is published on September 28 at £25**

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William Mittenduck · 11 HOURS AGO



The truth has been replaced by my truth. The truth is that I am at best a mediocre musician. My truth is that I am a musical genius denied fabulous wealth by the system. My truth is a warm bed. The truth is a cold shower.

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in academic circles as people are so fearful of being cancelled.

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S Stellulata · 6 HOURS AGO

Replying to Claire Skrine

Just like the Tol censor bot. Be a f r a i d.

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J John Mulvany · 23 HOURS AGO

Anyone who won't take the scilly knee sounds good to me

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C C Davis · 1 DAY AGO

Marvellous piece that gets alongside Pinker — Jesus' miracles as fake news? Excellent!

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I Ian Quansoon · 22 HOURS AGO

How should African Americans reconcile living their lives knowing that they are not at "SERIOUS" risk of being killed by police?

Pinker questions “the sudden adoption of a radical academic doctrine critical race theory”. Is he aware of American Jim Crow apartheid that legally ended just 57 years ...**See more** *(Edited)*

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G Gary · 9 HOURS AGO

Replying to Ian Quansoon

Over 90 % of black people in the US are killed by other black people (Crime Stats.). Further there are 700,000+ police in the US. If all the other murders were perpetrated by a different police officer that would mean less than 1 % of police killed a black person.

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J Jan Williams · 11 HOURS AGO ⋮

And your scientific definition of race is...?

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E EMI · 9 HOURS AGO ⋮

My kids each did an A/S level in a subject called Critical Thinking alongside their GCSEs. I read the course notes at the time and realised just how uneducated I was in recognising manipulation, straw men arguments, sifting fact from flotsam, understanding statistics and that's me coming from a sci...**See more**

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H Harry Greenidge · 14 HOURS AGO ⋮

"Vaccination, after all, is injecting an infectious agent into your body." eh?
By design almost all modern vaccines are non-infectious. A vaccinated person cannot spread the vaccine agent to another person.

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S Sita Kaur · 19 HOURS AGO ⋮

A brilliant article. I love Dr Pinker- if that is not overly irrational!

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A Ann Other · 13 HOURS AGO ⋮

It is welcome to read an opinion from a respected source which points out the dangers of group think. But sadly is too American. The propensity to react with paranoia to events is embodied in US 'culture' from the Salem trials to McCarthyism, the 'good guys/bad guys' foreign policy doctrine . Pinker...**See more**

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 **Harry Greenidge** · 13 HOURS AGO 

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In the UK, the rejection of vaccine science did not come from the right ... it came from those who distrusted the establishment, which ...**See more**

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