

SCIENCE TIMES AT 40

Steven Pinker Thinks the Future Is Looking Bright

The Harvard psychologist says he is no starry-eyed optimist. It's just that the data don't lie.

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Steven Pinker, a cognitive psychologist at Harvard, has been known to take provocative positions. He has argued that women are intrinsically different from men, that we are more driven by our genes than academics like to acknowledge, and that society is getting less violent over time — despite the mass shootings and other atrocities we hear about daily.

The thesis of his latest book, “Enlightenment Now,” is that life on Earth is improving. By every major measure of human well-being, from personal safety to longevity to economic security to happiness, people everywhere are far better off today than they were before the start of the Enlightenment in the 17th century.

I sat down with Dr. Pinker to talk about how science has made life better, and what humanity needs to do to keep the good times rolling. This is an edited and condensed version of our conversation.

What first gave you the idea that the world was getting better?

I stumbled across data showing that violence had declined over the course of history. The homicide rate in England was 50 times higher in the 14th century than it is today.

Were you surprised?

Like any other news reader, I just assumed that there was as much mayhem as ever. It's only when you plot it over time, taking into account all the people who don't get murdered or raped, that you can see the trends.

And these trends extend to other aspects of life?

It's not just in violence that one sees progress, but in poverty, in illiteracy, in access to small luxuries like beer or televisions. The percentage of the world getting an education, in gender parity in education — girls are going to school all over the world. Even in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the world's most retrograde countries, the rate of female education has increased.

It was an epiphany from seeing graphs of human improvement that changed my view of the overall course of history: that progress is a demonstrable fact. It's not a matter of seeing the glass as half full. It's not a matter of being an optimist. It's a fact that very few people know about.

What's behind all this good news?

The most overarching explanation would be that the Enlightenment worked. The idea that if we — we being humanity — set ourselves the goal of improving well-being, if we try to figure out how the world works using reason and science, every once in a while we can succeed.

You have argued that there is such a thing as human nature. Do you think we can transcend it?

Part of human nature allows us to control the other part of our human nature. Even though humans tend to be unreasonable, it can't be the case that we're incapable of reason — otherwise, you'd never be able to make the argument that we're being unreasonable. Even if we tend to backslide to irrationality, that doesn't mean we should indulge that when we are deliberating how to run a society.

It sounds as if there's a political dimension to what you're arguing. Are you running for office anytime soon?

No! I was surprised by how much interest there's been from centrist politicians, who are desperate for a coherent narrative to defend centrist liberalism, cosmopolitanism, open society, from the threats both by populists and by the hard left. I think there is a hunger for a coherent worldview that isn't just the status quo, the un-Trumpism. We can do better than that. We ought to use reason and science to

enhance human well-being.

Do you think science played a role in these positive developments?

Yes. Advances in longevity and health — life expectancy on Earth has grown from about 30 to more than 70, in rich countries to more than 80. Health and prosperity, and sustenance — the fact that famines are far rarer than they used to be. Malnutrition is much lower, infectious disease. More generally, I see science as part of the Enlightenment — namely reason applied to human betterment.

Yet we also know that science has caused misery.

There's a lot of blame to go around. The value of science is not the value of a bunch of people who call themselves scientists. It's the concept. It's also the value of science that tells us when there's been a failure of reasoning, that identifies the biases and distortions and also points the way to overcome them.

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So, we need institutions like government to keep us acting rationally?

None of us is anywhere close to perfect. Scientists themselves are not terribly, not completely rational. We can set up institutions that result in greater rationality than any of us is capable of individually, like peer review, like free speech, like a free press, like empirical testing — norms and institutions that make us collectively more rational than any of us is individually.

Do you think science can continue to address humanity's problems?

If we're going to solve the problem of avoiding catastrophic climate change, it's going to come through technology. If you can bend the curve with advances in science, and people can just do what is cheapest and most convenient and that spares the planet — that's our most feasible pathway to avoiding catastrophe. I do think that science and technology are going to be absolutely essential to meeting those challenges.

Why do you think people continue to hold on to demonstrably unscientific beliefs?

It looks like the biggest reason is not because they don't know the science, but because of their political ideology. The reason that people deny human-made climate change is not that they're ignorant of climate science, but because they're on the political right. Conversely, people who accept human-made climate change don't necessarily understand what's causing it. There are scientists who believe that Al Gore's making of "An Inconvenient Truth" is the worst thing that ever happened to climate change awareness, because he branded it as a left-wing issue, and then the right rejected it out of hand.

Is it impossible to combat this irrationality?

One answer is to make people aware of it, because I think most people are not. Then once one has that understanding, to try to depoliticize issues as much as possible. I do try to disassociate empirical issues from political baggage.

How have these ideas about progress changed you?

I read the news differently to try to put events of the day in perspective. The mainstream media are a hell of a lot better than the not-so-mainstream media, but I've noticed a number of sources of systematic pessimism in journalistic practices. My own view of the world was radically altered when I looked at data instead of headlines.

If history is about all the wars, all the disasters, you're missing all this incremental improvement that can only be ascertained through data.

Does it matter that some things are improving if other things are getting worse?

I don't think the fact that some things are improving means *everything* is improving. That's not the way the world works.

It's no contradiction to say that we're extending human life and there are threats: threats of climate change, threats of authoritarian politicians. You can appreciate the threats, worry about the threats, try to fight back against the threats at the same time that you appreciate the progress that we have made.

I would say that it's appreciating the progress that gives us the courage and conviction to try to strive for more progress. History tells us that attempts to make the world better tend to succeed. We'll never achieve a utopia, but that doesn't mean we can't make things a little bit better.