



Talk Sept. 3, 2021

Steven Pinker Thinks Your Sense of Imminent Doom Is Wrong

By David Marchese Photograph by Mamadi Doumbouya

In our uncertain age, which can so often feel so dark and disturbing, Steven Pinker has distinguished himself as a voice of positivity. This has been a boon for him, as his books, like “The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined” (2011) and “Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress” (2018), have been best sellers and elevated the Harvard cognitive psychologist, who is 66, beyond academia and into the realm of the public intellectual. They’ve also generated no small amount of disagreement, with Pinker’s critics arguing, to cite two common examples, that his view of the world is overly sympathetic to the excesses of capitalism and too callous about the profound hardships still faced by so many. His latest book, “Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters,” takes on another provocatively large subject and will be published on Sept. 28. “Many philosophers that I know,” says Pinker, “think that the world would be better if more people knew a bit of logic.”

Your new book is driven by the idea that it would be good if more people thought more rationally. But people don’t think they’re irrational. So what mechanisms would induce more people to test their own thinking and beliefs for rationality? Ideally there’d be a change in our norms of conversation. Relying on an anecdote, arguing ad hominem — these should be mortifying. Of course no one can engineer social norms explicitly. But we know that norms can change, and if there are seeds that try to encourage the process, then there is some chance that it could go viral. On the other hand, a conclusion that I came to in the book is that the most powerful means of getting people to be more rational is not to concentrate on the people. Because people are pretty rational when it comes to their own lives. They get the kids clothed and fed and off to school on time, and they keep their jobs and pay their bills. But people hold *beliefs* not because they are provably true or false but because they’re uplifting, they’re empowering, they’re good stories. The key, though, is what kind of species are we? How rational is *Homo sapiens*? The answer can’t be that we’re just irrational in our bones, otherwise we could never have established the benchmarks of rationality against which we could say some people some of the time are irrational. I think the answer is, especially for publicly consequential beliefs: We achieve rationality by implementing rules for the community that make us collectively more rational than any of us are individually. People make up for one another’s

biases by being able to criticize them. People air their disagreements, and the person with the strongest position prevails. People subject their beliefs to empirical tests.



Steven Pinker in 1976, when he was an undergraduate at McGill University. From Steven Pinker

Are there aspects of your own life in which you're knowingly irrational?

The answer is almost certainly yes. I probably do things that morally I can't justify, like eating meat. I probably take risks that if I were to do the expected-utility calculation could not be justified, like bicycling. If I were to multiply the probability of my being killed by the value placed on my life, it would certainly be less than the same sum for getting my exercise by hiking or swimming. But nonetheless I enjoy bicycling. I try to mitigate the risks and to adjust my behavior to make it more ethically defensible. I have reason to believe at a meta-self-conscious level that whatever adjustments I do make are probably less than what would be optimal.

Do you see any irrational beliefs as useful? Yeah. For example, every time the media blames a fire or a storm on climate change, it's a dubious argument in the sense that those are events that belong to weather, not climate. You can never attribute a particular event to a trend. It's also the case, given that there is an availability bias in human cognition, that people tend to be more influenced by images and narratives and anecdotes than trends. If a particular anecdote or event can in the public mind be equated with a trend, and the impression that people get from the flamboyant image gets them to appreciate what in reality is a trend, then I have no problem with using it that way.

What about love? There's nothing irrational about love. Ultimately our values are neither rational nor irrational. They're our values; they're our goals. David Hume made that point: There's no rational argument why I should rather be happy than sad or healthy rather than sick. But we have to acknowledge basic human needs. It's a misconception to think that if you are joyful, if you are awe-struck, there is something irrational about it, and if you're rational you've got to be a robot. If you'll pardon the expression, that's irrational.



Pinker at M.I.T. in 1991. Puppets figured into his study of language development in children. From Steven Pinker

I don't think I'm alone in feeling that rising authoritarianism, the pandemic and the climate crisis, among other things, are signs that we're going to hell in a handbasket. Is that irrational of me? It's not irrational to identify genuine threats to our well-being. It is irrational to interpret a number of crises occurring at the same time as signs that we're doomed. It's a statistical phenomenon that when events are randomly sprinkled in time they cluster. That sounds paradoxical, but unless you have a nonrandom process that spaced them apart — *We're going to have a crisis every six months but we're never going to have two crises in a month* — events cluster. That's what random events will always do.

You mentioned changing social norms. How can we know if the fights happening in academia over free speech — which you've experienced firsthand¹ — are just the labor pains of new norms? And how do we then judge if those norms are ultimately positive or negative? These fights clearly reflect a new regime of norms. The way we evaluate whether they are truth-promoting or not is twofold. One is by analyzing what they reward, what they punish. Are they specifically designed to reward more accurate beliefs and to marginalize less accurate ones, as, for example, the norms of science ought to do? There are norms in my own field, such as

preregistering studies,² that did not exist 10 or 12 years ago and that can be justified because we know that the old norms led to error and the new norms reduce errors. Moreover, this isn't just etiquette. You can explain why that norm change is necessary in order to achieve our goal of the truth, whereas other norm changes descend on people like a kind of etiquette and are not scrutinized for their effects on achieving the goal of alignment toward truth. The second part of the answer is, does a community that has those norms tend to say true things or false things? You can contrast the set of norms around Wikipedia on the one hand and Twitter on the other, to take two digital platforms that differ a lot in their commitment to the rules that are implemented in order to steer users toward the truth. Does Wikipedia have a good track record? It's not bad. It's comparable to Britannica.³ If someone were to do that for Twitter, I think it's obvious what the answer would be.

You said we have to look at whether or not new norms are designed to reward more accurate beliefs or marginalize less accurate ones. How does that apply to subjective issues like, for example, ones to do with identity? I guess as with all moral arguments, there's not an objectively correct answer, but there can be matters of consistency with values that everyone holds. If everyone agrees that fairness is a value, that education and health and happiness and long life are values, then you could prosecute moral arguments by saying that a particular position is inconsistent with other values that the arguer may hold. I used this example in "Rationality": The English feminist Mary Astell appropriated words from John Locke about how people should not be subjected to the arbitrary will of other people. She said if that's a good argument against autocracy and against slavery, why doesn't everyone hold it with regard to women? Similarly, in the 1960s and '70s, the arguments that people had accepted on racial equality were then extended to gender equality and then to sexual orientation. So in the case of free speech, for example, if you believe that the arguments against slavery in their time and against Jim Crow laws more recently could only have been expressed when people had the freedom to voice unpopular opinions, then you can't now say that free speech is inherently dangerous.

Pinker at a lecture in 1997. Brooks Kraft/Sygma, via Getty Images

I think it's fair to say that the scope of acceptable academic perspectives and subject-matter study areas has widened immeasurably over time. People can study a multitude of things today that would in the past never have been admitted into academia. But the popular conception is that academic discourse is narrowing. How real is that concern? Is the evidence for it just anecdotal? It's a pointed question to me because one of my sh*ticks is don't let your head be turned by flagrant examples, look at the overall trends. The answer is yes, it has gotten worse, as best we can tell. If you look at the number of cases that the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has to deal with every year of flagrant violations of students' or professors' right to express their opinions; if you look at attitudes among students, do you think it's justifiable to fire a professor

who has offensive beliefs? There has been a worsening in the last five years. So it isn't just anecdotes. Although some of the anecdotes are hair-raising. Such as, to take a recent example, the law professor⁴ who was investigated for raising the possibility that Covid-19 resulted from a lab accident, which until very recently was considered racist beyond the pale. I hope it's not true. But I have to admit that it might be true. We can't call somebody a racist for raising the question. Another thing that we know, no doubt as a consequence of some of these trends, is that confidence in academia is sinking.⁵ It is an unfortunate trend because it means that in cases where academics ought to have credibility, where the research is not infected by political correctness, such as climate change, there's a sapping of confidence in the scientific consensus. Given that virtually every climate scientist believes that human activity is warming the planet, how could anyone deny it? The answer is, people don't necessarily believe what scientists say because they correctly sense that within academia a person can get punished for unorthodox beliefs.

Isn't it more likely that skepticism about climate change has to do with bad-faith efforts by corporations or politicians than declining confidence in academics? I think it's both. The fact that there are grounds for worrying about groupthink in academia means that those admittedly vested interests can gain too much traction. That is, vested interests can gain credibility if they can point, as they now can, to suppression of debate within academia.

What links do you see between rationality and morality? Hume was probably the first of a series of philosophers to point out that they are not the same. That is, you can't, as the cliché goes, get an ought from an is. That is technically narrowly true, but it doesn't go very far. Because as soon as you make the nonrational commitment that well-being is good, health is better than sickness, life is better than death and we care about how others treat us — that our fates depend on other people's behavior — once you grant those, a lot follows rationally. Such as that I can't justify treating you in a way that is different from the way I expect you to treat me. Just because there is no logical difference between me and you. So a kind of golden rule, categorical imperative, can be derived rationally from the nonrational positions that I care about my well-being, and that my well-being depends on what you do, and that you can understand me. Now,

there can be disagreements. If you believe in an afterlife, for example, you might devalue life on Earth compared with salvation. But to the extent that people do care about life on Earth, certain things do rationally follow.

One of the recurring criticisms of your ideas on progress is that our having an awareness of how much better the situation is for the impoverished today compared with the impoverished of the past doesn't actually make anybody's life better and, in fact, minimizes contemporary suffering. Is there a moral gap there? I think that's a fallacy. It can be true both that there are fewer poor people, fewer oppressed people, fewer victims of violence and that there are still poor people, oppressed people and victims of violence. We want to reduce that suffering as much as possible. The fact that there has been progress helps us identify what drives down poverty and violence and illness. But there's also a moral component, and that is: What actually dislodges us from fatalism? What gives us the gumption to try to reduce war further? Maybe you can eliminate it, or poverty? The United Nations and the World Bank and development experts say: Let's see, we've reduced poverty from 90 percent of humanity to 9 percent. Can we push it to zero? That might seem utopian, but if we got it from 90 to 9, let's try to get it to 6 and then 5 and then 4 and then 3. It gives us the rational reason to believe that it is not utopian, and the knowledge of what we should and what we shouldn't be doing.

Pinker giving a lecture at the British Library in 2011. Nick Cunard/Writer Pictures, via Associated Press

If we agree that well-being is better than its opposite, where does economic equality fit in? Is that a core aspect of well-being? I would say it is not the core aspect, although fairness is. The core aspect is flourishing, having the resources necessary to have a stimulating, healthy life. The fact that Warren Buffett exists by itself doesn't make me any worse off. We should distinguish the mere fact that some people earn more than others from the possibility that they did so by illicit means. Of course, unfairness is morally wrong. But inequality per se? People could disagree. In "Enlightenment Now," I cite the old joke from the Soviet Union: The two dirt-poor peasants Igor and Boris are just barely scratching a living out of their tiny plots of land. The only difference being that Boris has a goat and

Igor doesn't. Then a fairy appears to Igor one day and says, "I'll grant you any wish." And he says, "I wish that Boris's goat should die." If you can see the humor in that, then you could perhaps appreciate an argument that equality that simply makes some people worse off and doesn't make anyone better off is a dubious moral good. The more defensible moral good would be raising the bottom rather than reducing the difference between the bottom and the top.

Is it possible that the rising-tide-lifts-all-boats economic argument provides the wealthy with an undue moral cover for the self-interested inequality that their wealth grants them? Oh, absolutely. It is a danger that all democracies have to safeguard against: With wealth comes influence and power, and there's the constant vulnerability that the wealthy will game the rules to favor themselves. Another is related: Given that we have a tax system, it's elementary fairness that the rich should pay a greater share, that taxes should be progressive. For the obvious reason that an extra dollar means a lot more to a poor person than a rich person. So it hugely increases aggregate welfare if the rich pay a greater share than the poor. For all the debates in the United States as to whether governments should reduce poverty, should support education, support health, the debate is kind of over. We already do. All affluent societies do. It's easy to be seduced by a kind of radical libertarian argument that the role of government should only be to help enforce contracts and maintain safety and law and order. However appealing that might be in theory, in practice it doesn't exist anywhere. There's no such thing as a libertarian paradise of an affluent democracy with no extensive social safety net.

Just going back to shifting norms in academia: Does the current atmosphere have any bearing on what you're willing to say in public? It is something that I think about. I manage my controversy portfolio carefully. Partly because, as my late colleague Bob Nozick⁶ would say, you don't have to have an opinion on everything.

Says the guy who's written multiple books trying to explain human nature. [Laughs.] Yeah, right. I don't shy away from defending the positions that I think can and ought to be defended while not squandering my credibility by being outrageous for the sake of it. I do defend the abstract principle that people should be able to express opinions that they can defend. In making that argument, it isn't like the classic case of the A.C.L.U.'s defending the right of the Nazis to march in Skokie,⁷ namely that we

should allow crazy and offensive and bizarre beliefs to be expressed because that's what free speech is all about. Which, I actually do believe that. But when people are canceled or punished for expressing beliefs that might very well be true or are not outrageous, are not wild, that they can defend — that's the greater danger.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations.