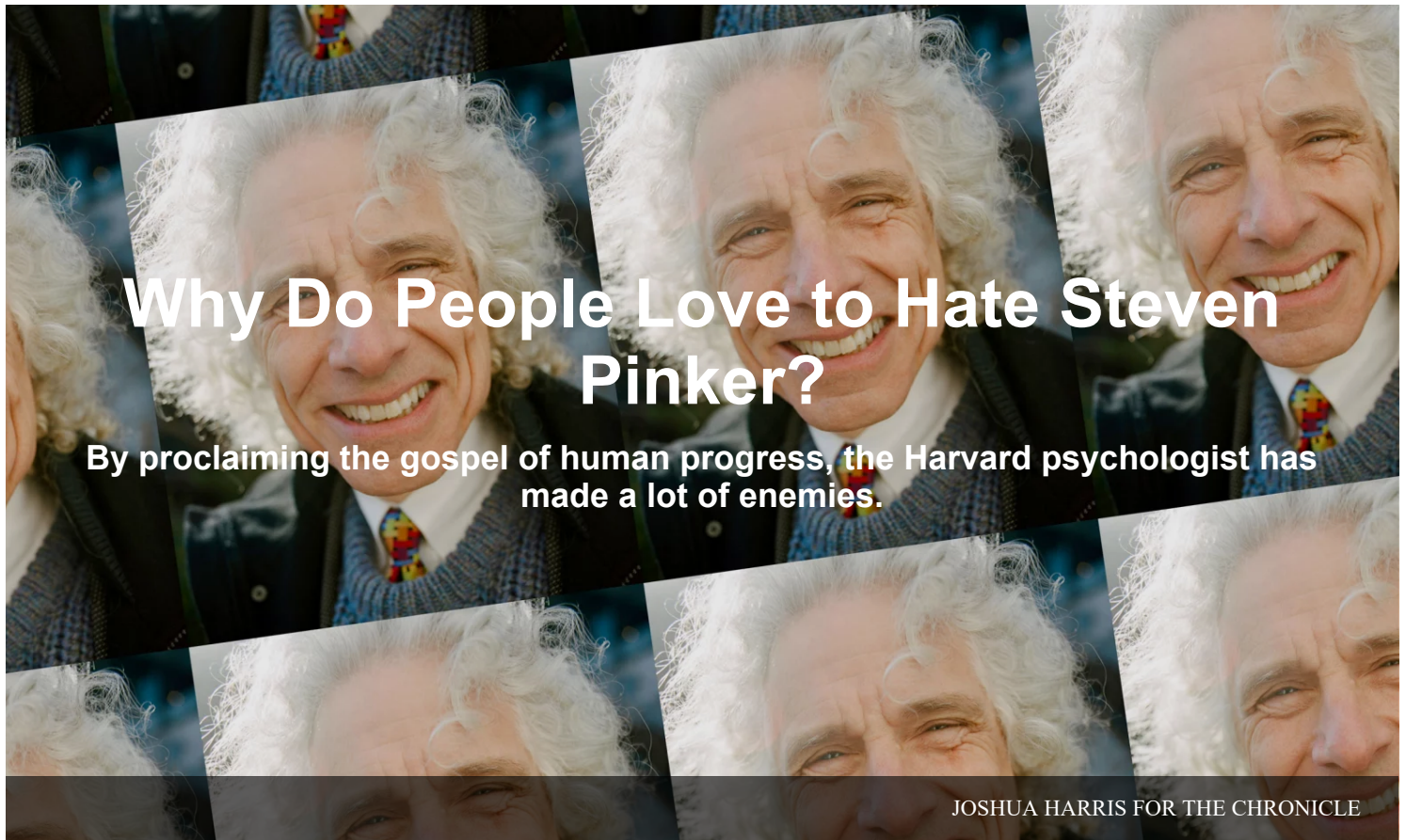


# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## THE REVIEW

By *Tom Bartlett*

MARCH 7, 2019

**S**teven Pinker is pacing the green room. In a few minutes, he'll be seated across from Fareed Zakaria, host of CNN's *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, but for now he is collecting his thoughts and preserving his voice (a mild case of laryngitis is hampering his normal crisp delivery). On the wall are two TVs: one features panelists discussing the latest tweet from

the president of the United States, while the other replays surveillance video of a thief climbing through a Burger King drive-through window. Pinker often skewers the news media for “keeping the country’s anxiety at a boil” and “focusing on trivial gaffes and scandals” — a bias toward negativity and nonsense that, he argues, distorts the national conversation. The chatter from the dual screens seems to bolster his point.

And yet here he is, at CNN studios in New York. Pinker turns down interviews if he’s asked to be a mere talking egghead, opining on that day’s outrage. But if you wish to grill him about his thesis that humanity is better off now than ever before, Pinker is willing to oblige. Over the last year, since the publication of his book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Pinker has made the rounds on PBS, NPR, and the BBC, popped up on Al Jazeera English and HBO’s *Real Time with Bill Maher*. He’s been interviewed by all the usual outlets, like *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, along with some less-usual ones, like *Playboy* and the *Santa Barbara Independent*. He hesitated before agreeing to appear on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast, hosted by the comedian and mixed-martial-arts commentator, but that booking introduced him to an audience beyond the usual ideas-conference crowd. (Says Pinker: “The guy at the airport who puts the wand in your crotch recognized me from the Rogan show.”) Richard Dawkins recently crowned Pinker “our leading public intellectual,” and a colleague declared him “the most-covered man in social science.”

Pinker does get a lot of press, though most-covered doesn’t always mean most-loved. While *Enlightenment Now* received ecstatic blurbs — Bill Gates called it his “favorite book of all time” — other assessments were less kind. A *New York Times* reviewer panned it as “disdainful and condescending — sympathetic to humanity in the abstract but impervious to the suffering of actual human beings.” The dismissive term [“Pinkering”](#) has been coined to describe applying a too-sunny gloss to world events. A cartoon strip published in *Current Affairs* shows a crazed-looking Pinker staring into a mirror: “Remember,” cartoon Pinker says to himself, “no matter what people say it’s statistically impossible for you to be the worst person on the planet.” In addition, a surprising number of detractors have referred to Harvard’s Johnstone family professor of psychology as “Peven Stinker,” which, while not exactly an argument, does capture a certain disdain.

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It's not like he was uncontroversial before. His 2002 bestseller, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Viking), ruffled egalitarian sensibilities by arguing that our tabulae are far from rasa. He's also dipped into contentious debates about gender differences, infanticide, and IQ. But the pushback against his more recent work, beginning with *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011), feels harsher, more personal, at times tinged with real anger. Which is surprising, in part because his message — that, hey, despite some significant challenges we're making progress as a species — seems benign enough. Pinker doesn't come off like a bomb-thrower; friends and colleagues describe him as generous, curious, eager to share credit. He carries himself with none of the swagger of an academic rock star, though he's on a short list of those who could reasonably claim that title.

So how did such a nice guy become such a big target?

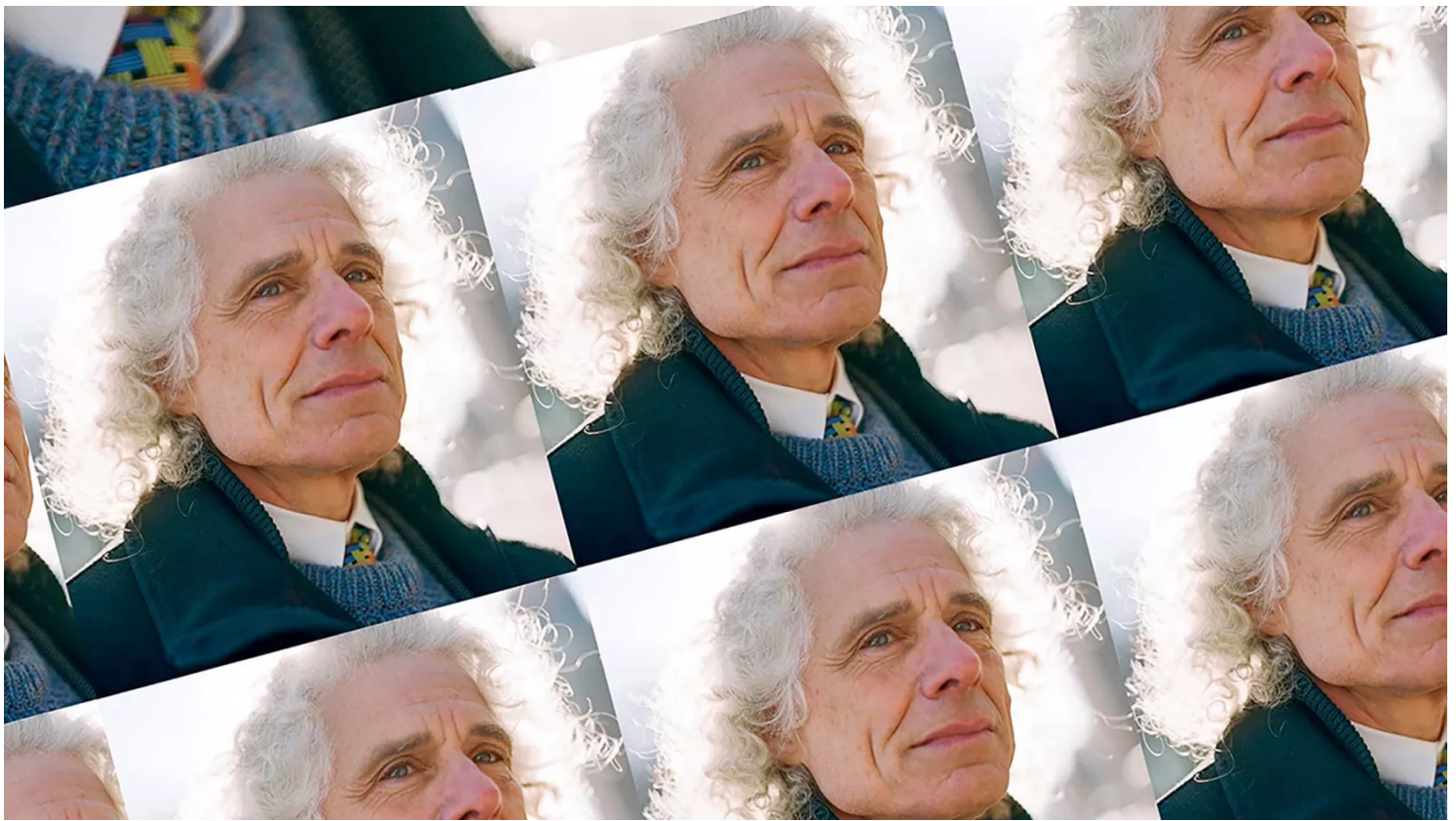
Pinker's early work didn't inspire a thousand hot takes. His research focused on topics like how children learn to speak and recognize objects. He wrote papers with titles like "Formal models of language learning" and "Mental imagery and the third dimension." A fellow Harvard psychologist, [Ellen Langer](#), recalls a talk he gave as a graduate student in the late 1970s. "It was so professional and smart," says Langer, best-known for her research on mindfulness. "I remember all of the glances that the faculty gave each other." His potential was obvious to Susan Carey, too. Carey, whose work on language development overlapped with Pinker's interests, spent a couple of decades at MIT and helped recruit Pinker to the university in the early 1980s (she's at Harvard now, too). "He was very clearly the real deal right from the beginning," she says.

Long before Harvard, Pinker remembers telling his mother, whom he credits for creating a rich intellectual environment at home, that he “loved ideas and wanted to be paid to think for a living.” He had heard the term “think tank” and thought he might want to work at one, though he wasn’t quite sure what that might involve. When he was a teenager, Pinker, who is Jewish, taught a class for sixth-graders at his temple on ethics and Israel. He found that he liked it, and the role suited him.

By the 1990s, Pinker had more than lived up to the promise as a scientist that Carey, Langer, and others saw in him. He wrote and edited books on visual cognition and language development, and he served as co-director of MIT’s Center for Cognitive Science. While his reputation as a researcher grew, he wasn’t much known beyond the academy. That changed with the publication of his 1994 book, *The Language Instinct* (William Morrow), which wrestled with Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar. Linguistics can often feel impenetrable to outsiders, the debates disconnected from reality; Pinker fashioned those arcane controversies into bestseller material.

More popular books followed, including *How The Mind Works* (Norton, 1997) and *The Stuff of Thought* (Viking, 2007). By translating his research, and that of others, for a general audience, Pinker was following a well-worn publishing path. Pinker is better at it than most: polished, witty, informative without lapsing into lecture mode. Part of his secret is not talking down to the reader. “Think of your audience as your college roommate,” he says. “People who are as intelligent, and curious and sophisticated as you, that happen to have gone into some other line of work.” He once read a review praising Richard Dawkins for making the reader feel like a genius. “That’s an aspiration of mine,” Pinker says.





JOSHUA HARRIS FOR THE CHRONICLE

When he's at work on a book, Pinker writes obsessively, to the exclusion of almost everything else. "I tend to write morning, noon, and night until I'm finished," he says. "There's a low level state of anxiety that keeps me going until the project is done." Gary Marcus, once Pinker's student and now a professor of psychology at New York University, remembers working on a paper with him years ago. "He would write for 12 straight hours," says Marcus, who struggled to keep up. "He could just go and go."

Pinker's career took a surprising turn in 2011 with the publication of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. He first floated the idea in a 2007 piece for *The New Republic*, arguing that "today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth." Pinker radically expanded that thesis over 832 pages featuring scores of charts and loads of statistics. Among influential social-science door-stoppers published in the last decade, *Better Angels* occupies a shelf alongside Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, and Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. It's a book you should at least pretend to have read.

*Enlightenment Now* is, in a sense, a follow-up to *Better Angels* — though at 500-plus pages, it's no skimpy retread. Pinker argues that humans are not just less violent these days but better off in myriad other ways: healthier, smarter, happier, all thanks to the spread of science and reason. It's a book that maintains Pinker's devotion to data, while venturing into new areas, like philosophy (he credits his wife, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, a philosopher and author of *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*, with inspiring this tack). With definitive-sounding chapter titles like "Life," "Wealth," and "Knowledge," Pinker seeks to prove his view that Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and Voltaire are among the authors of human flourishing, and that we need to continue abiding by their time-tested prescriptions.

I had lunch with Pinker after his CNN interview. When he walked into the restaurant, the waitress exclaimed "Oh, you look like you stepped out of *GQ* magazine!" Pinker was wearing a vibrant blue suit, purple tie, and Lucchese cowboy boots, which he likes because they give him a couple extra inches — he's 5-foot-9 — and lengthen his stride. At 64, he's maintained a trim build thanks in part to cycling (his friend Michael Shermer, founder of the Skeptics Society and a former professional cyclist, attests that Pinker can really ride). His iconic, curly mane is a little less luxuriant than it was a couple decades ago, and the color has gone from salt-and-pepper to mostly salt. If the TED Talk people wanted an avatar, they could do worse than Pinker.

I had compiled a file with some of the most barbed criticisms of Pinker, and I read them to him as he ate sushi and sipped a beer. He doesn't check his Twitter mentions so he hadn't heard some of the more creative slams (for example: "the Milli Vanilli of Whig history"). "I can't say that it doesn't affect me," Pinker says, though he tries to take the negative feedback in stride. He also points out that there have been plenty of positive reviews, and he's regularly greeted at readings by fans who say the book has changed how they view the world.

Pinker isn't shy about taking on his more substantive critics. Among the most persistent is the philosopher John Gray, whose firmly pessimistic outlook feels like the precise reverse of Pinker's approach. Gray has called *Enlightenment Now* "embarrassing" and a "parody of Enlightenment thinking at its crudest." Gray told me he considers Pinker a "not terribly

interesting thinker.” The feeling appears to be mutual. Pinker shrugs off Gray’s critiques as “the kind of argument only an extremely articulate sophist would make.”

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Another longtime nemesis is [Nassim Nicholas Taleb](#), the best-selling author, statistician, and former Wall Street trader who made his fortune betting against optimism. Taleb accuses Pinker of “unstatistical reasoning” and of disregarding so-called fat-tailed variables — that is, when Pinker contends that we’re living in an extended period of relative peace, Taleb laughs and points out that a nuclear war or other cataclysm could wipe out those gains, just like the subprime mortgage crisis upended the stock market. Pinker responded at length to Taleb in an essay titled “Fooled by Belligerence,” a play on the title of Taleb’s book *Fooled by Randomness*, writing that Taleb has not read his work carefully and that “accurate attribution and careful analysis of other people’s ideas are not his strong suits.” When asked if he’d ever debate Taleb, Pinker shrugs. “He’s more of a bully than an intellectual,” he says. It’s possible that Taleb, who likes to compare himself physically to a bodyguard, would take that as a compliment.

But Taleb’s not the only one who makes this case. Even some scholars who know Pinker and respect his work, like Niall Ferguson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, are concerned that his undeniably eloquent tone has turned dangerously reassuring: “I have this really awful feeling that one day we’ll all be sitting in a bombed-out bunker saying, ‘Hey, remember Steven Pinker’s book?’”

Cue the Norman Angell comparison. In 1910, Angell, a British journalist and politician, published *The Great Illusion*, which argued that because Europe had become economically intertwined, the fallout from a war would be disastrous. In Angell’s own words, his thesis is “not

that war is impossible, but that it is futile.” Angell, though, is often mischaracterized as saying that wars had gone extinct, an assertion that would have been tragically ironic on the eve of World War I.

During Pinker’s CNN interview, Fareed Zakaria repeated that mischaracterization, and Pinker tried to correct him. But as is often the case with cable news, there was no resolution and viewers were left to wonder who was right. (For the record, Pinker was.)

Like Angell, Pinker’s not saying that everything will be hunky-dory no matter what, though that’s often how it’s interpreted. *The New York Times* headlined a Q&A “Steven Pinker Thinks the Future is Looking Bright,” which isn’t quite what he means. Instead what he’s said — repeatedly, over hundreds of pages — is that humanity has made impressive headway, but there are zero guarantees. “If we keep trying to solve problems, and those problems are defined by human well-being, then humanity will get better,” he says. “But if we slack off or we change our priorities to something else like glorifying the nation, then it may not continue.” That’s why he prefers “possibilist” over “optimist” — though so far that term hasn’t caught on.

Samuel Moyn doesn’t buy Pinker’s attempts to carefully couch his argument in get-out-of-disaster-free language. Moyn, a professor of history and law at Yale, dissected *Enlightenment Now* for *The New Republic*, accusing Pinker of minimizing the repercussions of increasing inequality and of an “outright refusal to acknowledge a messy picture” of the world. “I think he’s telling a lot of people what they want to hear and he’s distracting a mass audience from difficulties that they ought to face,” says Moyn, who offers only the faintest of praise for its author. “He’s excellent at synthesizing others’ results, but there is a huge amount of misleading framing in his work.”

But Pinker complains that it’s often his critics who garble his arguments, and then set about torching straw men of their own creation. For instance, a review in *The Nation* by David Bell, a Princeton historian, quotes Pinker as asserting that “there really is a mysterious arc bending toward justice,” as if the committed atheist had expressed faith in unseen forces. In fact, in the quoted passage, Pinker is saying the opposite: that social and political advancement only make it



seem as if such an arc exists. Bell stands by the quote, telling me that Pinker disregards the reality that societal improvements “take conscious political action” and that in the book Pinker evinces “contempt for intellectuals and what intellectuals do.”

There’s something to that last charge. In *Enlightenment Now*, Pinker writes that intellectuals hate “the idea of progress” while happily enjoying its multitudinous comforts (“they prefer to have their surgery with anesthesia”). He also mocks academics for embracing Marxism, dismissing science, and for being more interested in crafting critiques than searching for solutions. “It’s easy to take an oppositional stance if you’re not responsible for getting clean water to run through the pipes, sewage to be taken away, electricity to be provided, and police to ensure safety,” Pinker says.

Another knock on Pinker is that he is a psychologist traipsing around in other disciplines. To that, he pleads guilty. “Yes, I rely on the work of historians,” Pinker says. “They should be happy someone is actually making use of it.” Though historians, like Ferguson, aren’t always happy with that use. “The issue is what inference you draw from statistical trends of material improvement over time,” Ferguson says. “This is where a historian does think differently from a psychologist.”

As Pinker sees it, though, such criticism isn’t so much about him but about a fear-driven pushback against the intrusion of cold, hard data into the walled garden of the humanities. “By far, the nastiest and most aggressive academic responses I have seen come from humanities professors when there are ideas from the sciences that they see as encroaching on their territories,” he says. “That’s when you get rage and withering condescension.”

Last year Pinker briefly found himself on the defensive after saying that the alt-right is made up of “often highly literate, highly intelligent people.” On its face, it seemed from that quote that Pinker was throwing his lot in with incels, white nationalists, and assorted bigots. Pinker, however, went on to say that those drawn to the alt-right, intelligent though they may be, are then led to embrace “repellent conclusions,” in part because they’re encountering politically incorrect ideas for the first time and those ideas are like “a bacillus to

which they have no immunity.” Pinker thinks more robust and honest discussion can help inoculate students against being drawn into that radical fringe.

He’s also been a supporter of and contributor to *Quillette*, the online house journal for the Intellectual Dark Web, the loose collection of academics and writers who see themselves as forging a centrist path in a rigidly ideological culture. *Quillette* is either “unique and indispensable,” as Pinker puts it, or a “center for white male grievance,” as one critic described it. The *Quillette* ethos, to the degree that there is one, tracks closely with Pinker’s thinking. For instance, *Quillette* has run a number of pieces that question whether men and women have the same aptitudes and preferences, including one with the headline “Why It’s Time To Stop Worrying About First World ‘Gender Gaps’.” Pinker has been raising that issue for a while now, and back in 2005 defended remarks made by then-Harvard president Larry Summers on the possibility of innate sex differences. (That controversy dogged Summers, and he resigned as president the following year.)

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[Jordan Peterson](#) is the most visible figure associated with the Intellectual Dark Web, and Peterson has expressed enthusiasm for Enlightenment Now, and invited Pinker on his podcast. But while there’s undoubtedly overlap in their fan bases, in many ways Peterson is the anti-Pinker. While Peterson seems to revel in conflict, Pinker hates bickering. Pinker is willing to hold an unpopular opinion, but you’re unlikely to see him smacking down questioners, or one-upping his opponents onstage. Peterson has a mystical streak; Pinker does not. “Certainly his ideas are a far cry from mine,” Pinker says, “to say nothing of his style.”

Pinker's style is relentless friendly persuasion, a kind of indefatigable reasonableness that's either charming or crazy-making, depending on where you stand. He's been surprised, at times, by what he calls the "sheer anger" that *Enlightenment Now* and *Better Angels* have provoked from critics. One reason for that, he thinks, is simply that it's more enjoyable to take shots at the guy writing popular books than to praise him, and he cites a study that suggests reviewers who pan books are considered more intelligent.

The book he's working on now, tentatively titled "Don't Go There: Common Knowledge and the Science of Civility, Hypocrisy, Outrage, and Taboo," will attempt to unpack the psychology behind such outsized responses. "One of the reasons that you get shaming mobs, and conspicuous outrage, especially on social media, is when there is some common knowledge that's an affront to an understanding that is shared in some faction," he says. When that understanding is under threat, Pinker says, members of that faction "feel obliged to challenge it because their own identity is at stake." Though he doesn't put it this way, his latest project could be seen as a way of making sense of the backlash he's faced. Certainly he has no shortage of firsthand experience on which to draw: "It is something I'm going to have to think through and work out in more detail in the next book."

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## Tom Bartlett

Tom Bartlett is a senior writer who covers science and ideas. Follow him on Twitter [@tebartl](#).



