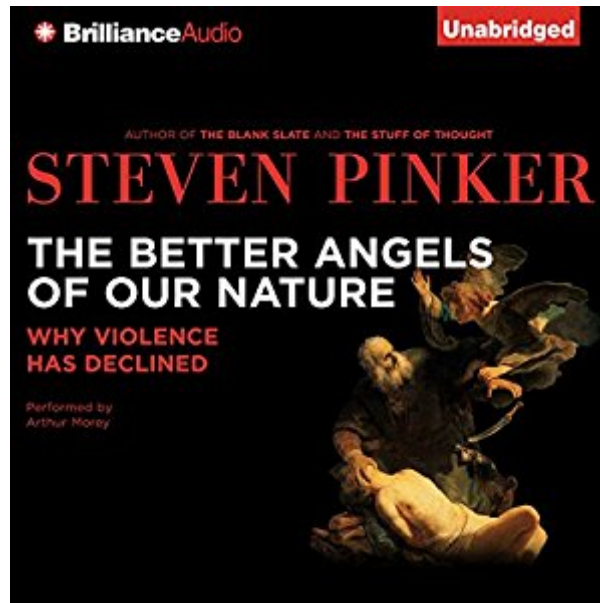




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The Better Angels Of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined



Synopsis

We've all had the experience of reading about a bloody war or shocking crime and asking, "What is the world coming to?" But we seldom ask, "How bad was the world in the past?" In this startling new book, the best-selling cognitive scientist Steven Pinker shows that the world of the past was much worse. In fact, we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species' existence. Evidence of a bloody history has always been around us: the genocides in the Old Testament and crucifixions in the New; the gory mutilations in Shakespeare and Grimm; the British monarchs who beheaded their relatives and the American founders who dueled with their rivals; the nonchalant treatment in popular culture of wife-beating, child abuse, and the extermination of native peoples. Now the decline in these brutal practices can be quantified. With the help of more than a hundred graphs and maps, Pinker presents some astonishing numbers. Tribal warfare was nine times as deadly as war and genocide in the 20th century. The murder rate in medieval Europe was more than thirty times what it is today. Slavery, sadistic punishments, and frivolous executions were unexceptionable features of life for millennia, then suddenly were targeted for abolition. Wars between developed countries have vanished, and even in the developing world, wars kill a fraction of the numbers they did a few decades ago. Rape, battering, hate crimes, deadly riots, child abuse, cruelty to animals - all substantially down. How could this have happened, if human nature has not changed? What led people to stop sacrificing children, stabbing each other at the dinner table, or burning cats and disemboweling criminals as forms of popular entertainment? Was it reading novels, cultivating table manners, fearing the police, or turning their energies to making money? Should the nuclear bomb get the Nobel Peace Prize for preventing World War III? Does rock and roll deserve the blame for the doubling of violence in the 1960s - and abortion deserve credit for the reversal in the 1990s? Not exactly, Pinker argues. The key to explaining the decline of violence is to understand the inner demons that incline us toward violence (such as revenge, sadism, and tribalism) and the better angels that steer us away. Thanks to the spread of government, literacy, trade, and cosmopolitanism, we increasingly control our impulses, empathize with others, bargain rather than plunder, debunk toxic ideologies, and deploy our powers of reason to reduce the temptations of violence. With the panache and intellectual zeal that have made his earlier books international best sellers and literary classics, Pinker will force you to rethink your deepest beliefs about progress, modernity, and human nature. This gripping book is sure to be among the most debated of the century so far.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've struggled a bit to write this review because I have mixed feelings about *The Better Angels of our Nature* by Steven Pinker. I started reading *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* with the attitude that Pinker needed to first convince me violence had declined before getting into explaining why. To be perfectly honest, given the world we currently live in, it's hard to imagine that violence has declined. While I finished the book convinced that violence has declined, I felt like the explanations for why seemed more hypothetical than proven. Pinker explored violence quite thoroughly beginning his book at the beginning of human existence and moving to modern times in the almost 700 pages of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. He explored historical myths as well as historical documents to arrive at his conclusions. He used archaeological finds to disprove mythical battles. He described how the development of etiquette and the creation of government helped quell violence and change our norms about violence. He used a combination of statistics, anecdotal evidence, and archaeological studies to present his case. Yet, the more I read, the more my college corrections statistics professor's words haunted me. He always warned our class to be careful when writing papers not to allow our biases and our desires to prove our points to affect the weight we gave the studies we used as evidence. Pinker seems less objective in some areas of *The Better Angels of Our Nature* than in other sections. He seemed to excuse violence against some people while unequivocally condemning it against others. This bias felt incredibly out of place in a book on why violence has declined. For example, when talking about things like the FBI's crime report and other such studies on crime, Pinker never mentions the effect of police discretion and biased court results on crime rates or how the statistics for individual areas are sometimes skewed.

by reporting or not reporting data. My assumption is he believes the numbers wouldn't be enough to skew the overall results, and a simple paragraph could have addressed that issue. Maybe even just a few sentences; however, if those sentences existed I couldn't find them. His inconsistent handling of anecdotal evidence and research surveys deemed certain groups of people more credible than others without giving a clear reason why. As I read *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, I found myself wanting it to be better than it was yet I still think it's a book worth reading. Pinker obviously studied violence in great depth. He explains the statistics in an easy to understand, straightforward method, and he tells the story of violence quite well. He makes violence the main character, for better or worse, in a story that is ongoing and relevant and important. In fact, Pinker tells the story so well and brings up such important points, facts, and conclusions, that I am tempted to dismiss the things that bothered me about the book. Yet, I can't do that in good conscience. Pinker drives home the fact that violence is much less acceptable than it used to be for a variety of reasons and that unacceptability has come about as humans have developed civilization and sought out ways to live together more peacefully. *The Better Angels of Our Nature* left me hopeful that we can continue to rise above violence and find nonviolent solutions in spite of my skepticism about certain sections of the book.

Steven Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* argues that contrary to the first ten minutes of your nightly newscast dotted with shootings, stabbings, domestic violence, robberies and other violent acts that violence has declined due to a very extensively laid out change in human history from biblical times to present that has led humans largely away from large scale violence. It is a big book at almost seven hundred pages, but it's also a big book in terms of ideas. In order to accept Pinker's thesis, one has to assume that the news media is wrong. That is not that hard a leap due to their nature to sensationalize and dramatize things. The bigger leap and harder ask at least in my case is asking people to look beyond their front door/window. If you as a person question your safety in your own neighborhood, then why care that you are not being crucified or stoned to death as in biblical times? Pinker is ultimately convincing that the violence is in decline because the norms of civilization have changed, but I really got lost in the last hundred pages or so when he got into the stuff on the human brain. That could be just a personal thing I hold a degree in political science not brain psychology, but I thought he may have reached too far from the basic idea of violence decline, but not assuring that this decline is permanent by telling what could change. It's a big idea book that loses something in the last hundred pages or so.

It's hard to imagine a more fundamentally important question than whether or not things are moving in the right direction. This is what popular science writing should be. This is an answer to the cute and all too easy answers of the Gladwell and Freakonomics types. Pinker does a marvelous job at being accessible without compromising rigor. He appears to be honest when arguments and data are stronger than others, leaving room for disagreement. In areas where I have a background, I can confirm he seems very knowledgeable. There are places where I was less convinced, but that seems inevitable for a book that tackles so much. Best of all, the writing style and sense of values shows a great concern for the human condition and an almost religious zeal for reason's ability to help it. You will never read the news the same way again.

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