

Interview – Steven Pinker

Written by E-International Relations

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Steven Pinker is a Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. He conducts research on language and cognition, writes for publications such as the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *The New Republic*, and is the author of ten books, including *The Language Instinct*, *How the Mind Works*, *The Blank Slate*, *The Stuff of Thought*, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, and most recently *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*.

Professor Pinker answers questions on mankind's tendency toward violence, Darwinism, the rights of women in Islamic societies, and his new book – *The Sense of Style*.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My world view has evolved throughout my career, under diverse influences. As a student in the 1970s I developed an interest in human cognition (including language) from the fomenters of the cognitive revolution of the 1950s, who analyzed the mind as an information-processor: George Miller, Marvin Minsky, Herbert Simon and Allen Newell, Noam Chomsky, Jerry Fodor. Starting in the 1990s I broadened my research interests to the rest of human nature after reading about the replicator-centered revolution in evolutionary biology launched by George Williams, John Maynard Smith, William Hamilton, Robert Trivers, and Richard Dawkins, and applied to human psychology by Donald Symons, Martin Daly, Margo Wilson, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides. Judith Rich Harris, the independent scholar who wrote the brilliant book *The Nurture Assumption*, kindled an interest in behavioral genetics and the development of personality. My wife, the novelist and philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, expanded my world view to appreciate the Enlightenment and the primacy of reason. Most recently, my interest in the decline of violence (and in human progress more generally) was inspired by the international relations scholars John Mueller, Joshua Goldstein, Andrew Mack, James Payne, and Nils-Petter Gleditsch; by the historical criminologist Manuel Eisner; and by chroniclers of the history human rights such as Anthony Grayling, Lynn Hunt, and K. Anthony Appiah.

In *The Blank Slate*, you discussed human nature as a product of Darwinian natural selection. To what extent does this idea of human nature determine your political outlook?

It doesn't determine it, but it certainly influences it. I believe that there is such a thing as human nature; people are not passive lumps of clay molded by parents, the media, the schools, or the government. Humane political institutions should allow people to realize their desires rather than seeking to implant those desires. But human nature is a complex system, with many interacting faculties. Among them are ones that lead us into conflict, including the drive for dominance, a thirst for revenge, self-serving biases, and a nasty habit of moralizing tribal loyalty, deference to authority, and safeguarding purity. We also have faculties that can enhance cooperation, including self-control, empathy, and a sense of fairness. Most importantly, we have an open-ended, combinatorial faculty of thought, and a parallel system for language that can share those thoughts, which allow us to conceive new ideas, evaluate them, and pass on the ones that work. This combination militates to a political philosophy that combines elements of Hobbes and Enlightenment optimism. Left to our own devices, humans won't live in harmony, because of the inherent instability of life under anarchy and the parts of human nature that egg us on to exploitation, dominance, and revenge. But we have the wherewithal, in principal, to devise political institutions that serve as workarounds for our nasty and

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brutish side, and these can become more humane and effective over the course of history, just as scientific theories and engineering achievements become more effective over the course of history.

How does the concept of human nature that you hold differ from Chomsky’s (someone who has been a big influence on your work in linguistics)?

Chomsky, it’s fair to say, is not a Hobbesian, but has a far more romantic theory of human nature than I do, in part because he rejects Darwinian evolutionary biology as a major source of insight about human nature. No thoughtful Darwinian can be an anarcho-syndicalist.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, you described the ongoing and global decline of violence through multiple concepts, for example the “Pacification Process,” the “Humanitarian Revolution,” and the “Civilizing Process.” If this is the case, can we lean back, let history take its course, and look at the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram as small but ultimately futile disturbances in human progress? Or is this progress a collective project that could possibly come to a halt – and therefore has to be promoted and, if necessary, enforced?

We certainly can’t lean back. The progress we have enjoyed did not come from some mysterious Hegelian dialectic, course of history, arc of justice, or cosmic force. It came about because our ancestors didn’t lean back, but did their best to curb the violence around them, and sometimes they were successful, and we’ve learned from those successes. So yes, progress is absolutely a collective project. In theory it could come to a halt, just as, in theory, you might have a shorter lifespan than your parents, or your next iPhone may be less powerful than your current one—but I doubt it. The rise of those vicious groups in some of the anarchic backwaters of the world is irrelevant to the overall trends—a symptom of getting your world view from the news rather than the numbers. The vast majority of the world’s population is freer, healthier, and richer than it was a few decades ago. As long as the rate of violence in the world is not zero – and it never will be – there will always be violent events to lead the evening news, whereas no reporter ever stands on a peaceful street reporting on how peaceful it is. That’s why it’s a fallacy to reason from the news.

You’ve argued that some of the worst episodes of violence during the 20th century came about through “the catastrophic decisions of a few men who took the stage at particular moments in the 20th Century,” in this case Hitler, Stalin, and Mao. As humanity progressed, did the danger of this happening all over again also decline? Can we say that the world of today is less at risk of populists and extremists getting into positions in which they can unleash large-scale violence – and didn’t we think this was the case before (especially after WWI)?

The probability that a narcissistic, power-hungry fanatic could wrest control of a major state and drag the world back into war is certainly greater than zero—Putin is a salient example. But it’s surely less than it was in the mid-20th century. More of the world is democratic today. The functioning of countries depends more on a distributed network of interests spanning national borders, so a totalitarian despot would have a great deal more trouble controlling a large country. And many countries have learned some lessons from the 20th century. Putinism is undoubtedly a threat to peace, but he didn’t send tanks into Ukraine like his predecessors did in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and not even the most hawkish of the hawks among his international opponents is conceiving of confronting him all-out on the battlefield, as empires did a century ago. China is in many ways a nasty place, but nowhere near as nasty as it was under Mao. As for the mindset before World War I, it’s a myth that people thought they were living in an era of perpetual peace. Much of the political, artistic, and intellectual elite glorified war as necessary for human progress and moral integrity, arguing that peaceful nations would only wallow in decadent consumerism. Even the retrospective laughingstock of the era, Norman Angell, did not argue on the eve of World War I that war was impossible. He argued that it would be pointless and self-destructive—and history proved him right.

You’ve pointed out that societies over time have expanded their moral circle to include individuals and groups that previously weren’t considered moral agents. You also favourably talk about some philosophers and activists who are now invoking animal rights, something that’s unprecedented in

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history. However, in your conclusion to *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, you don't foresee the moral circle fully expanding for non-human animals in the same way that it has for women, slaves, children, and racial minorities in the past. Can you give some reasons for this?

There are big differences in people's minds between African Americans, women, and homosexuals, on one side, and pigs, chicken, and mice on the other. For one thing, nonhuman animals lack the dense social networks, intense emotional bonds, and acute ability to reflect on their own lives and futures that are birthrights of Homo sapiens and which give us a wider set of interests than other animals. More generally, animals fall along a continuum of sentience, and unless we afford full rights to mosquitoes, termites, hookworms, rats, and other creatures, we have to draw a bright line that is inevitably arbitrary, and the human/nonhuman line is the brightest one of all. Also, our morality has to accommodate the viciousness, cruelty, and waste of nature – no one thinks twice about saving or reintroducing threatened species like tigers and wolves just because they will cause the terrifying and agonizing deaths of countless innocent herbivores – and if you give other carnivores a moral pass because they evolved to hunt, kill, and eat, it's hard to call humans “murderers” if they humanely raise and slaughter their own prey animals. Of course, none of this means we can't treat animals with far less cruelty in the future than we do today, even if we don't extend the same rights to them that we do to African Americans or women.

You've talked about how attitudes towards certain groups, like women, children, racial minorities and so forth, have radically improved in the West over the last number of decades and centuries. What do you think has to happen for attitudes to change in places where equal rights do not currently exist, such as the case of women in many Islamic states?

Some of that is already happening. Opinion polls show a huge amount of pent-up demand for women's rights in the Islamic world, and many Islamic countries have signed on to aspirational statements on the rights of women. These are natural consequences of the spread of literacy, education, ideas, and awareness of other cultures, together with the growth of national and international forums in which people are called on to defend their ideas and practices. Given what we know in the 21st century, the oppression of women is a very hard practice to defend, and it survives in places that are ruled by authority and tradition and can get away with perpetuating the indefensible. How to accelerate this trend in repressive societies which squelch the exchange of ideas and punish or kill people for expressing their ideas is a profound challenge and one that I don't have an easy answer to. What makes repressive regimes either maintain in power or crumble, and how systems of norms either perpetuate themselves or unravel, is a deep puzzle for the science of social and informational networks.

Your new book – *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* – explores writing style and how to write well. What were your motivations for writing about this topic and what are your aims with this text?

I'm in the unique position of being a crossover academic who tries to explain technical material to a wide audience in clear language, and someone whose academic speciality happens to be language. I hoped to apply what we've learned about language, cognition, and human nature to the applied problem of communicating in clear and stylish prose. Almost all of the existing style manuals are based on the tastes and peeves of writers, and are innocent of modern linguistics, lexicography, grammatical theory, psycholinguistics, and cognitive science. I thought I was well positioned to combine my own experience in struggling to communicate clearly with what I know about the sciences of language and mind. If I have succeeded, then readers who want their writing to reach beyond a narrow circle of peers – hell, even those who want to reach their peers within that circle – will have found a cure for their academese, professionese, bureaucratese, and other bad habits.

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This interview was conducted by Al McKay. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.