

## Where Angels Fear To Tread: Steven Pinker's *Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*.

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Steven Pinker reports in *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that human progress might have an "aura of mystery about it" (p.694). The process appears to be so mysterious that humanity can't see itself moving within its own circle of light. The "most important" things that have "ever happened in history" (such as the decline of violence and an escalation of reason) have generally gone unnoticed.

The [arc of the moral universe might bend towards](#) the light, but certain inner demons (like fear and ignorance) continue to cast a dark shadow. It isn't difficult to see why perfectly rational people might otherwise think they are living in the darkest period in history. The Holocaust, Hiroshima, September 11, Columbine, the Virginia Tech and Norway massacres (amongst many others) loom large in our memories. Nonetheless, seeing the world as a "nightmare of crime, terrorism, genocide and war" (xxi) is merely the result of "historical myopia" (p.193) and 24/7 news cycles.

We "may be living in the most peaceable era in our species history" (xxi), and the declines in violence can be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment. Those who *have* noticed the downward trends in warfare and homicide might be tempted to see a "higher power at work", an almost "magical process" that defies rational explanation (p.694, quoting James Payne). They might even wonder whether our moral ascent is actually "evidence of divinity in history" or signs of a "divinely imparted meaning" in human affairs (p.694, quoting Robert Wright). The famed evolutionary psychologist obviously does not succumb to such a temptation.

Pinker locates the apparent design within an adaptable 'human nature' — changes in our moral universe have evolved by means of natural selection. Pinker's deployment of [the phrase](#) "better angels of our nature", then, is metaphorical and places the emphasis on the "our nature" part. Our moral progress may be explained by the way certain biological traits have adapted to their environment. Consequently, Pinker wonders whether human evolution "might vindicate some notion of moral realism — that moral truths are out there somewhere for us to discover, just as we discover the truths of science and mathematics" (p.694).

Pinker has clearly written a big book, and at over 800 pages he explores even bigger questions, too. Don't be misled by the size of the tome or the depth of the questions, though. Pinker manages to conjure a death defying story from a range of fields and styles. Whatever its shortcomings, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* remains a spellbinding instance of pop scholarship: you might also think that your eyes are deceiving you when its pages appear to be [turning themselves](#).

One of the book's biggest mysteries is why it doesn't come gift wrapped. *The Better Angels of Our Nature* could certainly be taken as humanity's gift to itself. It's no wonder the [critical](#)

[consensus](#) has been overwhelmingly in its favor, and the book so well received in the mainstream press. Indeed, Pinker's book is confirmation that [popular culture matters](#) in the evolution of thought. Pinker wants to popularize ideas that have historically been the province of scholars. Consequently, its very presence there may be taken as an article of faith. He manages to appeal to our better natures by including other rational thinkers in the peer review process.

The question, however, is whether the book should be viewed as a jewel in reason's crown or as amongst its costume jewellery.

Unfortunately, Pinker too readily encourages us to see history through the lens of a transparent ideology (free market libertarianism aligning itself with neo Darwinism). This situation is made all the more transparent by the fact that he prefers to use the term ideology when describing belief systems other than his own. Indeed, "ideology" is included on his list of "inner demons" (p.xxv). Pinker's description of history is thereby reverse engineered to ensure that it reflects a world view that would ideally be called higher "intelligence", instead (p. 663).

Pinker clearly views history as a mirror, and so encounters his own reflection there: it's where reason unfolds in nature and can be seen ascending as such. Consequently, Pinker attempts to naturalize contingencies such as the content of his own beliefs and desires. Now, the concern is not so much that Pinker is a committed liberal capitalist: every other page remains testament to his humanism. The principles of human liberty and equality — [natural rights](#) as derived from [effective history](#) — are taken as a given. *Better Angels of Our Nature* is at its most persuasive when documenting the humanitarian and human rights revolutions (chapters 4 and 7 respectively). When Pinker recounts developments such as the abolition of slavery and the rise of women and gay rights (amongst many others), it's difficult not to agree with the assessment "If this isn't progress, I don't know what is" (p.133).

While Pinker is obviously on the side of the angels here, he's unfortunately not above making a [demon move](#) throughout his books. As philosopher Simon Blackburn observed in his review of Pinker's previous *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, such moves describe the way Pinker's arguments are themselves supposed to progress. (Simon Blackburn, "Meet the Flinstones", 25 November, 2002). The 'demon move' is essentially designed to cast opposing views in a particular light — it typically involves selective reasoning to ensure that it makes particular arguments look more (or less) reasonable.

Despite the author's encyclopaedic knowledge and extensive bibliography, for example, the references [too often seem to footnote Pinker's own prior assumptions](#). (Timothy Snyder, "War No More", January-February, 2012). One of these assumptions includes Pinker's conception of enlightenment. As philosopher John Gray [observes](#), Pinker views competing concepts of reason as if they formed a coherent body of thought, conveniently ignoring the fact that many of these thinkers were also anti liberal-capitalists and/or pro violence. (John Gray, "Delusions of Peace", 21 September, 2011).

Another problematic assumption is Pinker's relatively benign view of liberal democracies. Since democratic nations reportedly don't go to war with each other, they are said to be

more peaceful than (say) military dictatorships. Pinker neglects to inform us, however, that they can form [coalitions of the willing](#) so as to export democracy through warfare, and there is negligible mention of the [scale of resources absorbed by military activities](#) in 'peace loving' democracies. The role powerful democratic nations play in [supporting repressive regimes](#) (through arms sales and foreign policy) is similarly obscured via an emphasis on "gentle commerce" (p.165 et al). According to Pinker, a "free market puts a premium on empathy" (p.77) because it encourages trading partners to see things through one another's eyes, thus curtailing their violent impulses.

Equally unenlightening is his view of our religious heritage. Pinker justifiably highlights religion's role in human carnage throughout history. Less justifiable is his attempt to demonize one of history's moral arbiters, or the way religion — like liberal democracy — has been a pretext for nations to consolidate their power through warfare. To quote Blackburn, with slight amendments in brackets. "In other words, right from the start there is a question-mark over Pinker's historical method... A more detailed history...would uncover a whole tapestry of shifting and conflicting attitudes (towards violence). So we ought to worry about the ease with which Pinker conjures his (angels and) demons." (Simon Blackburn, "Meet the Flinstones", 25 November, 2002).

The concern, then, is whether the normative status of modern civilization (it's content and trajectory) can be explained in evolutionary terms. Few should doubt whether "moral progress is compatible with a biological approach to the human mind" (xxvii). Take away our natural capacity to think and feel, and you'd have neither human progress or morality. The question is whether a biological approach can explain the status of our moral reasoning : to what extent do 'biology' and 'morality' become in/compatible?

If natural selection is supposed to be blind (morally neutral, subject to the vagaries of chance, and primarily directed towards organisms competing for survival), then why should nature select these values (as opposed to others) in order to survive? Pinker wants us to believe that it is in our nature to be rational, but this begs the question as to why liberty (as opposed to slavery) should be thought more rational/natural.

Aristotle, for example, saw humankind as a 'rational animal', and also argued that moral progress was the result of cultivating certain traits based on the use of our natural reason. And yet one of history's greatest thinkers thought that it was part of the [natural order](#) for rational people to enslave others — a fact that most of [recorded history](#) has unfortunately born out.

Pinker's ideological filter also obscures the tension between the logic of a free market and the rationale of human freedom, [throwing into question](#) which should be thought more natural and/or rational. While the history of ideas currently vindicates the ideology of capitalism over (say) the ideologies of feudalism and communism, the unasked questions remain: to what extent is a free market economy an instrument of violence and/or tries to naturalize unequal social relations and arrangements?

*The Better Angels of Our Nature* , then, keeps falling victim to the [halo effect](#), or a cognitive bias that tends to overvalue certain facts while undervaluing others. It's important to see the effect this has on his reasoning: it creates an aura around reason itself. There's no

denying that Pinker's approach can be illuminating. Nonetheless, Pinker's lopsided view of reason highlights the limits of rationality, or the way it attempts to mark the boundary of (and adapt to) its own environment. Instead of highlighting the phenomenon of natural selection, Pinker constantly draws attention to the problem of selective reasoning.

[The problem of confirmation bias](#) is nowhere more evident than in the way he selects and evaluates the history of violence. As another critic [observed](#), Pinker's reasoning resembles a "magic wand" that he waves over history to invoke 'human nature'. (Louis Menand, "What Comes Naturally", 25 November, 2002).

Pinker's conceptual sleight of hand is worthy of any magician — except his use of misdirection appears to be part of the act. He brazenly shows his hand by weaving anecdotes, statistics, research, speculation, and narrative together in order to pull reason out of his hat. He's acutely aware that the hand waving cannot do the heavy lifting for him, per se. The reason he shifts from one mode of description to another is to transfer the burden of proof and lighten his load.

The only problem is that the overall approach tends to equivocate — evidence of relative value is allowed equal weight. So when he anticipates questions that run counter to his thesis (such as the concentration of violence at the start of the 20th century and the role of reason in the Holocaust), he'll try to dismiss them out of hand.

Such an equivocal approach can be seen in the way he measures the decline of violence throughout history and relates it to the question of moral progress. The measurements are relative to estimates of the world's population — which has obviously increased throughout time. It's important to stress that the 'scaling by population size' occurs across historically distinct populations, and moral progress is measured in terms of whether individuals were likely to die a violent death at given times.

Pinker allows himself to extrapolate from scant archaeological evidence and compares different civilizations as if they all belonged on the same moral continuum. He attempts to draw a moral equivalence between distinct historical periods and/or (estimated) occurrences of violence. He's able to do this by relativising (adjusting and ranking) the data according to estimated population sizes. Instead of measuring violence in absolute terms — such as how many people might have died violently per annum — he attempts to measure estimates of people killed relative to estimations of the world's population at given times. The sleight of hand is evident in the way the violence is measured over time — since there are many more people alive today, there are now less people being killed (relatively speaking). Conversely, since there were less people alive back then, there were more people being killed (relatively speaking). Either way, the ratio between a violent and peaceful death becomes a measure of moral progress.

Perhaps the best way to highlight the problem of relative measurements is via the moral equivalence that eventuates. To quote [Iodore](#) from the comments section of [Guardian's interview](#) with Pinker:

By defining the effects of a violent act (or series of acts) in relative terms, Pinker allows for all sorts of absurd reductios. Imagine that I'm trapped on a desert island with a companion

and, in a dispute, I kill him. By Pinker's logic, I am thereby morally equivalent to a dictator who has killed 3.5 billion people in current population terms. Without a doubt, Pinker is correct to say a randomly selected individual is less likely to die a violent death now; but this merely means the population has increased, not that the rate of absolute violence has dropped off.

Historian Timothy Snyder also questions Pinker's [metric of progress](#). (Timothy Snyder, "War No More", January-February, 2012)"

Yet even if Pinker is right that the ratio of violent to peaceful deaths has improved over time... his metric of progress deserves a bit more attention than he gives it. His argument about decreasing violence is a relative one: not that more people were killed annually in the past than are killed in a given year of recent history but that more people were killed relative to the size of the overall human population, which is of course vastly larger today than in earlier eras. But ask yourself: Is it preferable for ten people in a group of 1,000 to die violent deaths or for ten million in a group of one billion? For Pinker, the two scenarios are exactly the same, since in both, an individual person has a 99 percent chance of dying peacefully. Yet in making a moral estimate about the two outcomes, one might also consider the extinction of more individual lives, one after another, and the grief of more families of mourners, one after another.

### **A Jewel in the Crown? Or Costume Jewellery?**

Sociologist Charles Tily would probably turn in his grave if he knew that Pinker was measuring the history of violence (and our moral progress) in relative terms. As he [observed ten years ago](#):

More collective violence was visited on the world (in absolute terms, and probably per capita as well) in the twentieth century than in any century of the previous ten thousand years... earlier wars deployed nothing comparable to the death-dealing armaments and state-backed exterminations of civilians characteristic of twentieth-century conflicts. Between 1900 and 1999, the world produced about 250 new wars, international or civil, in which battle deaths averaged at least 1,000 per year. That means two or three big new wars per year. Those wars produced about a million deaths per year. Altogether, then, about 100 million people died in the twentieth century as a direct result of action by organized military units backed by one government or another. A comparable number of civilians likely died of war-induced disease and other indirect effects.

And during what Pinker calls the 'long peace':

Since World War II, we have witnessed increased deployment of violence not by officially constituted national armed forces but by paramilitary forces, guerrilleros, death squads, secret police, and other irregulars, and increased direction of state-sponsored and state-seeking violence against civilians, especially whole categories of the population stigmatized for their religious, ethnic, and/or political identities. These trends greatly exceed population growth and the multiplication of independent states; they constitute an enormous increase per capita and per state. ("Violence, Terror and Politics as Usual", Summer 2002).

There is also the related problem of quantifying acts of violence and assigning them relative values. If we compare and rank qualitatively distinct atrocities — say the Holocaust and Rwanda massacres — do we really get a measure of their respective magnitudes? The problem of measuring acts of violence — of trying to determine their moral import or historical significance — is not just that bodies have piled up or can be counted and plotted across points in time. It's that we also need to try to qualify the violence with respect to their circumstances and distinctiveness. Ask yourself this: does it really make sense to conceive genocide — or indeed, a single murder — in terms of a body count? To what extent is it valuable to compare eight hundred thousand people being hunted down and hacked to death to millions of people being rounded up and gassed? Each is inconceivable in their own right and needs to be contextualized and questioned accordingly.

One of the consequences of Pinker's metric of progress is that it inadvertently allows us to conceive the question of genocide in relative terms. Specifically, which instance of mass murder do you think was more (or less) civilized (relatively speaking)? Is it worst to be killed by a crazed mob wielding machetes or to die via conveyor belt and filing system?

Perhaps we should also be questioning whether it is even civilized to measure violence in relative terms. Specifically, what kind of meaning does a statistical value offer people actually living and dying in more violent parts of the world? If 'we' now live in a world where more people are less likely to get caught up in violence, what relevance does this statistic have for those people actually living and dying in (say) Iraq, South Africa or Mexico?

Part of his rhetorical stance is that historical myopia distorts our view of whether humankind is really more violent, and the resulting ratio is meant to reassure us that humanity generally lives and die in a [less violent world](#). Pinker's own view of violence, however, encourages us to be myopic in a different way: such relative truths can only have relative meaning or value.

The sleight of hand, then, extends to the way he juxtaposes qualitatively distinct historical events in order to contextualize the relations between them. Witness the way he compares The Mongol Conquests and World War II. According to his own ranking (No 2 and No 9 respectively), such outbreaks of violence can be compared and evaluated because of similarly horrific death tolls. The only problem is that the point of comparison is illusory: comparing culturally distinct periods is not very enlightening. The Mongol Conquests spanned many more generations and continents, and arose within its own historical context. The violence that occurred during the Second World War, on the other hand, was relatively brief and dense and is only intelligible within its own context. The question, then, is: to what extent is it even rational to compare them in the first place?

Another questionable bit of inflation is Pinker's willingness to use unverifiable body counts to rank history's atrocities. The An Shan Rebellion remains infamous in the annals of history: while the estimated deaths range between 13 and 36 million, he goes with the largest figure and his population scale adjusts the figures accordingly (429 million people in contemporary terms). Historical scholarship, however, is not so quick to get out its abacus and (moral) compass.

Indeed, anyone [attempting to investigate](#) this violent period in Chinese history immediately becomes aware that the circumstances themselves make the violence difficult to quantify. Specifically, the suspected death toll is based on a significant variance between two censuses over a single decade — AD 753 (52,880,488) and AD 764 (16,900,000) respectively. Consequently, the question is what is being really measured in the disparate body counts: a population nearly wiped out by political instability or a destabilized society unable to keep track of its own populace?

The point, of course, is not that Pinker is being unreasonable when including the An Shan Rebellion amongst our species darkest periods. We're more highlighting the strategic role it plays within his reasoning. Since he invariably focuses on a history of Western civilization, however, its strategic value becomes increasingly questionable. Assigning it a near mythical status (No 1 with a bullet!) doesn't enlighten anyone about our respective places in history.

Pinker's use of reason effectively creates a self-serving mythology — like it's possible to understand and control the complex forces of history with equations and storytelling. And in case you have difficulty following him while he's "chasing his tale", so to speak, he even has pictures (graphs, tables) to move the burial plots forward. He's thereby able to plot a narrative arc that supposedly corresponds to our species moral progress. There's no denying that Pinker's storytelling casts its own spell — he is able to pull evolutionary psychology out of the resulting tale.

The story is the sequel to the one he told in the *The Blank Slate*, and it goes a little something like this.

The tale of humankind is about the triumph of the better angels of our nature (empathy, self control, moral sense and reason) over our worst inner demons (predation, dominance, revenge, sadism and ideology). While humans are neither innately good or bad, our biological makeup remains a measure of our true character: we all have a "fixed human nature" (p.xxv) that can "steer" (p.573) us one way rather than another. Indeed, the direction in which our "psychological faculties" have moved us is the direct result of how our biological features have "been increasingly engaged" (p.573) over time.

To cut a long story short, humans already "come equipped" with conflicting (or competing) "motives", and it is this biological equipment "that can orient them away from violence and towards cooperation and altruism" (xxv). The important thing to stress is what Pinker means by motives here — they're natural capacities, and the mechanism by which humans direct their actions throughout history. The question, then, is the "changes in historical circumstances that engage a fixed human nature in different ways" (ibid). Pinker purports to be able to reverse engineer humankind by redirecting it back towards the "civilizing process" (p.59).

While he identifies a number of historical processes, some are clearly more integral than others. Following Norbert Elias, Pinker urges that a "culture of honor — the readiness to take revenge — gave way to a culture of dignity — a readiness to control one's emotions" (p.72). Rational self control ensured that people could "moralize their emotions" (p.73) until feelings of (say) guilt or shame "became second nature" (p.72). And this ability to control ourselves found expression in two major developments: the rise of governments with a

monopoly on legitimate uses of violence, and the spread of gentle commerce, or monetary exchanges that put a premium on the value of living trading partners. Subsequent triggers include growing literacy and more literate people being able to move up the escalator of reason — literacy is said to cultivate a greater awareness of the psychological reality (or moral worth) of other people while higher intelligence ensures that it's possible to steer rational people in the right direction (towards making moral estimates of their respective outcomes).

Now, while this is obviously a superficially plausible tale, it's faced with equally obvious difficulties. For starters, it presupposes the very things at issue — namely why a culture of dignity should have been thought more dignified (valuable, civilized) than a culture of honor, and how the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence took effect (was itself monopolized and enforced). Pinker wants a value judgement about certain values to do nature's work for him. He tries to steer nature in the direction of 'civilization' by the way certain capacities are cultivated by their environment.

But where do such capacities receive their directions (their cultural status) in the first place? A related difficulty concerns the direction of fit between 'nature' and 'culture'. While biology might 'steer' humans towards certain value systems, it fails to enlighten us about how such 'capacities' receive their directives and/or which way they should be directed, i.e, how we should rationally determine (evaluate and cultivate) our own capacities.

To cite Pinker's own steering as motivator metaphor. Each time you get into a car, you'll note that it comes with standard equipment (features such as an engine, steering wheel, accelerator, brakes and headlights, etc). Given these features, you should be good to go anywhere you like. It remains an open question, however, why you might be motivated to steer in one direction rather than another (you could either go to the gym or to a fast food restaurant ).

It's not the car that's driving you — it's you that's driving the car. To acknowledge this fact is not to subscribe to Pinker's dreaded ghost in the machine. It also agrees that the person in the driver seat is not a blank slate — there are a number of reasons why you might be motivated to work out or eat junk food (other driving/environmental factors such as hunger, social status or socializing). So the direction you go — and the reason/s your directed there — can't be explained by a relatively straightforward biological explanation. There is still the question of determining (evaluating) our reasons for acting and steering ourselves accordingly.

Pinker's attempt to map out the domain of reason merely highlights how territorial it can be. He's able to mark his territory in two ways. He uses reason to provide a quantitative view of history, and attempts to demystify developments by mapping out qualitatively distinct events. This map of history supposedly provides a true measure of our species moral progress. The instrument of reason therefore becomes a self fulfilling prophesy: it can successfully create a world in its own image by placing the emphasis on instrumental values. Humankind has learnt to adapt to potential threats through more valuable (useful, mutually beneficial) measures. Perhaps that's why Pinker can approach history as a foregone conclusion: moral progress 'follows' in both a historical and rational sense (it ends up being



the same difference). Since violence has (relatively) declined, we are supposedly more rational (peaceful, humane, co-operative, etc).

One of the book's outstanding mysteries, however, is why it fails to critically engage the surrounding intellectual environment (such as left leaning "critical theorists and postmodernists", p. 642.). Actually, it's not a real mystery at all. Pinker typically makes a demon move in order to [appear on the side of the angels](#) (to now quote biologist H. Allen Orr slightly out of context).

"It is, after all, easier to ridicule (potential) critics by portraying them as (unreasonable) than by engaging their actual arguments. It's easier to win a debate if the audience can't hear what the other side says." (H. Allen Orr, "Darwinian Storytelling", 23 February, 2003).

Now is not the place to examine the many species of such arguments — they are much more sophisticated and varied than Pinker indicates. Nonetheless, *Better Angels of Our Nature* inadvertently brings to mind what critical theorists call the [dialectic of enlightenment](#). Indeed, it comes across as an unintended parody of the contradictory process outlined in Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal text ([see here for a pdf of chapter 1](#)). Although their critique is not [without its own contradictions](#), Pinker's reasoning nonetheless highlights the way 'myth' and 'enlightenment' remain two sides of the same coin. And as critical theorist Jurgen Habermas might observe, the book invariably documents the way reason has been colonized by the [steering media of money and power](#), reinforcing the [dialectic of enlightenment](#). The dialectic is the way enlightenment (our supposed better angels) simultaneously produces its own shadow (unleashes demons and a corresponding mythology). Specifically, where the civilizing process is also a decivilising process.

One way to illustrate this internal contradiction is by emphasizing something that Pinker tries to downplay: the role nuclear weapons play in the 'long peace' (post World War II environment). Pinker's account of reason makes every attempt to interpret away the fact that we continue to live in a M.A.D. world. Specifically, the long peace has come at an incredibly high price: the possibility of mutually assured destruction. He'll persuasively talk about the taboo surrounding such weapons, and assumes that a nuclear age is unlikely to resort to using them during conflict situations. His calculus nonetheless fails to take seriously the ways the moral equation has trans/formed the international environment. The question is not whether they should be used, but who has a 'legitimate' monopoly on the threat of potentially devastating violence.

### **Making a Demon Move**

Many nation states spend huge sums on the presumed principle that it's better to be safe than sorry, and will actively try to deter others from being in a similarly powerful position. And yet it's this mutual desire for safety that simultaneously puts billions of people at risk and creates potential conflict situations. The possibility of their possession and/or use merely becomes another pretext for war (see the invasion of Iraq, the current tensions between Israel and Iran, India and Pakistan, etc) and illicit trading practices in the form of a [nuclear black market](#).

The advance of reason, then, brings with it two contradictions: the long peace remains contingent upon the threat of nuclear war and/or a nuclear exchange (however unlikely) threatens to return civilization to the dark age within a flash of light.

Another contradiction concerns the moral status of the civilizing process, or the way the concept of civilization reflects existing balances of power. Peace is not just a relative state of equilibrium: it may also be a measure of disproportionate threats and/or uses of violence, giving rise to questions of legitimacy (via civil disobedience or acts of terrorism). The fact that there has been many years of (relative) peace therefore never legitimates 'peace' in an absolute sense. Pinker's celebrated state of affairs doesn't so much confirm that democratic nations are more peaceful (humane, cooperative) than their counterparts — it's more a measure of their monopoly on power and spheres of influence. It's for this reason that Charles Tilly draws an analogy between organized crime and nation states: they similarly [provide protection](#) by creating threats and offering security at a price.

And while Pinker is obviously aware of colonialism, he seems unperturbed by the role the 'civilizing process' has played in the destruction of relatively primitive civilizations — the colonization of America, Australia, Africa and Asia (amongst others) remain disturbances of (relative) peace in the name of progress. The civilizing process has historically been the reason for the domination and subjugation of less 'civilized' people. Such a process therefore contradictorily affirms the values (goals) of peace and rationality through violence.

Another instance of this dialectic is a phenomenon that Pinker is not really interested in addressing: the contradiction between a (relatively) peaceful civilization and civilizations appetite for destruction. It's important to stress that Pinker measures the content of our characters in terms of its capacity for violence and/or attitudes towards violent acts. What are we to make, then, of public celebrations of violence in the form of (say) the *Call of Duty* and *Saw* franchises? Millions of people across the world go online to perfect their kill/death ratios, and gather together in cinemas just so they can witness graphic tortures and dismemberments. We're all aware that these franchises are not committing real acts of violence — they merely provide a relatively safe environment in which to engage our violent impulses. Nonetheless, the widespread desire for 'violence as entertainment' (and 'gentle commerce's' ability to capitalize on it) continues to speak to the contradictory nature of our moral character.

Relatively safe entertainments are not the only environments that morally implicate us in violence; real war can be turned into a form of entertainment or spectator sport, too. Witness the way an embedded media encouraged us to cheer on the Iraqi liberation. Particularly concerning is the way the media engaged our sense of empathy in order to offer moral support: we could be seen to liberate repressed women and children! And then, of course, no one was to be seen when reality reared its ugly head.

The revolutionary '60s poses a particular difficulty for Pinker's ideological filter. The widespread rebellions against social authority and institutions skew his account of the civilizing process, bringing into focus the contradictory picture that emerges within such a framework.

Specifically, an era trans/forming the social environment also hosted an unprecedented rise in crime rates — and these statistics didn't decline until many years later. As Pinker observes, the civilizing process — in the form of the human rights movements — coincided with a "decivilization process" (p.106), or the rise of the counterculture (rock 'n' roll, urban riots, free love, etc). On the one hand, this decivilization process confirms his thesis. During such a tumultuous period, there was a moratorium on inhibitions. The "inner governor of civilized behavior, self control" gave way to individuality, "spontaneity (and) self expression"( p 110).

Further, the "ideal that individuals should be embedded in webs of dependency that obligate them to other people in stable economies and institutions" (p.111) came under fire. On the other hand, decivilization simultaneously disconfirms Pinker's version of the 'civilizing process', or the relation between our inner and outer 'governments'. Specifically, what is the connection between the one process and the other? They appear to be entangled or spun from the same webs of social dependency and obligation.

It was only by challenging social institutions that governments lost their claim to legitimacy, and subsequently became obligated to institute more civilized behavior (an increase in human rights). This positive social change came from within those 'governors' willing to lose their inhibitions and/or self control, simultaneously giving rise to negative social changes (such as an increase in rape and murder). It should be remembered that this was the time that the 'legitimate' agents of the civilizing process were unleashing violence in Vietnam and against a populace crying for more freedom. The legitimacy of such a monopoly appears to have been challenged through anti social behavior (a seeming free for all that produced urban riots and human rights violations).

While Pinker tries to deny a connection between urban crime and the civil rights movement, his ideological filter fails to see the bigger picture: equality before the law doesn't equal human freedom in capitalist societies. The one nation was still [moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal](#). This required a destructive environment (unequal distributions of wealth and power) to be similarly addressed and remedied, [\(otherwise\) the country faced a system of apartheid in its major cities](#) and a never ending spiral of violence.

At the heart of Pinker's account lies another contradiction he can't resolve: breaching the limits of his own reasoning. By his own reckoning, "statistical thinking... suggests that we are apt to exaggerate the narrative coherence of history" (p.208). This doesn't prevent him, however, from going on to ask "the money question: has the probability that a war will break out increased, decreased or stayed the course of time"? (p.209). Unfortunately, it's a loaded question, and presupposes the very thing at issue: the extent to which the past can be a measure of (divine) the future. Perhaps the more valuable question is: what gives events their probative value?

Prediction might be part of statistical inference, but divination lies outside reason's domain and borders on superstition. The problem is that historical trends and patterns are encountered retrospectively, while the future is yet to happen and approaches from varying distances. The occurrence of events resist a logical and orderly progression while 'history'

remains subject to [narrative conventions](#) and conflicting interpretations. The randomness of events — unexpected occurrences and consequences — remain an integral part of the flux of experience, making it difficult to get a full measure of their import or meaning at any given time. Indeed, this is nowhere more evident than with the occurrence of the [black swan event](#) that casts a dark shadow over Pinker's own history of violence.

Specifically, an unexpected occurrence had unlikely ramifications: it literally triggered two world wars and played an indirect role in genocide half a century later. As Pinker himself notes — quoting the narration of Matthew White — a relative nobody is [arguably the most important person in the twentieth century](#). Gavrilo Princip unleashed unlikely violence (in absolute terms) when unexpectedly assassinating the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in Bosnia.

"Here's a man who single-handedly sets off a chain reaction which ultimately leads to the deaths of 80 million people. With just a couple of bullets, this terrorist starts the First World War, which destroys four monarchies, leading to a power vacuum filled by the Communists in Russia and the Nazis in Germany who then fight it out in a Second World War."

Setting aside the tenability of such a straightforward narrative, the Bosnian genocide may nonetheless be retrospectively linked to this chain of events, too (the 1995 atrocity has its roots the post war carve ups and the Serbian attempt to regain control of Bosnia — Princip's motive for assassinating Ferdinand in the first place.) Pinker naturally attempts to minimize the significance of such black swan events, and calls the confluence of forces that "put the world at risk in the first half of the twentieth century" a "run of extremely bad luck" (p.209).

The concept of luck, however, is not exactly measurable in scientific terms — [it remains](#) an "unknown and unpredictable phenomenon" by definition, and runs counter to reason by appealing to superstition (the fear that significant events lie outside human knowledge or control).

Pinker nonetheless remains confident about reason's ability to follow discernible patterns in the tracks left behind in 'history'. Relative declines in violence have permitted him to paint a pretty statistical picture — even if his 'long peace' remains a relatively short time within history and his statistics conceal more nebulous tread marks.

While Pinker tells us that he's averse to making predictions — it is to venture into "territory where angels fear to tread" (p.671) — he's being disingenuous. The whole point of *The Better Angels of Our Nature* is to try and convince us that the past remains a reliable moral guide to the future. And it was only by tracking reason's trail that has brought him to this contradiction in the first place: he has been [chasing his own adaptive tale](#) the whole time.

This maladaptation is perhaps most evident when following reason to one of its most unacceptable conclusions in the form of the Final Solution. Even the "ultimate euphemism" (p.567) is enlightening: it suggests a problem to be solved with reasoning. Unlike Pinker, we shouldn't discount the moral significance (or finality) of this 'solution' and its relationship to the 'civilizing process'. The Final Solution highlights the nature of the entanglement between moral thinking and immoral behavior (or the dialectic of reason).

Pinker refuses to follow reason to this 'logical' conclusion because he wants to convince us that moral arguments naturally lead us elsewhere: to the inescapable logic of reciprocal behavior (a mutual concern for the well being of others). Unfortunately, he's mythologizing reason's ability to escape the environment of its own logic.

The idea that the Holocaust was the product of the Enlightenment is ludicrous, if not obscene...The technological and bureaucratic trappings of the Holocaust are a sideshow in the reckoning of its human costs and are unnecessary to the perpetration of mass murder, as the bloody machetes of the Rwandan genocide remind us. Nazi ideology... was a fruit of the 19th century counter Enlightenment... (and)... the scientific pretensions of Nazism were risible pseudoscience. (p.643).

Therefore, if the Nazi's were really being reasonable (or completely rational), then they wouldn't have been led to the Final Solution. Now, there's no denying that Pinker is on the side of the angels here: the Holocaust would ideally have been [beyond the conceivable](#). The only problem is that the Nazi's also thought they were on the side of the angels, and they were able to manoeuvre themselves into this position by making the ultimate demon move.

The Holocaust involved demonizing (and then murdering ) millions of people by utilizing our practical reason (the general human capacity for resolving problems and determining norms of conduct). This is why the Final Solution has come to represent evil incarnate; like all ideologies, "the end is idealistic" and directed towards a "conception of the greater good" (p.556). The Final Solution was conceived by humans with a narrative about their place in history, and it involved telling a story about heroes (Nazis), victims (Germans) and villains (Jews). The Nazi's were thereby able to conceive the inconceivable and methodologically implement industrialized mass murder.

It's important to stress that Pinker is acutely aware that people do bad things for supposedly good reasons, and they are able to do this by falsely believing in "the myth of pure evil" (p.496). He says this myth is the consequence of "the moralization gap", or "self serving biases" (p.490) that play up one side's innate goodness and another sides's inherent badness. And he purports to be able to close this gap by moving up the escalator of reason and following the logic of reciprocal behavior (otherwise known as the [golden rule](#) within ethics).

If, for example, "it's bad for you to hurt me", that person is rationally committed to accepting "it's bad for me to hurt you" (p. 647), too. The only problem is that Pinker has inadvertently provided a moral justification for violence during war — the logic of reciprocal behavior (or 'do unto others as you would have them do to you') is also the way people can justify killing each other. If 'it's good for me to hurt you', it's also 'good for you to hurt me' essentially describes the rules of engagement.

Equally problematic is Pinker's belief that if a Nazi would put himself in the shoes of a Jew, he would be rationally committed to refraining from killing them. If the shoe was on the other foot, however, it does not follow that Nazi's are morally obliged to stop killing Jews —

if they were to be consistent they should (would) be forced to consider the unthinkable and volunteer to be killed.

Pinker's attempt to remove reason from the moral equation is equally questionable. He, too, conveniently displaces Nazism's systematic brutality on a world inexplicably gone mad (and bad). Such an emphasis prevents him from looking at reason's own shadow. Technology and bureaucracy weren't a sideshow — they were the pivot on which the dialectic of enlightenment turned.

We only have to look at the Nazi appropriation of the swastika to see the nature of the entanglement between good and evil. Although this equilateral cross has come to symbolize evil (unprecedented death and destruction) in the West, its rotating movement is an ancient symbol of the circle of life (the human desire for peace and prosperity). The swastika has been found within civilizations dating back to antiquity, and continues to persevere in modernity in Eastern cultures.

Symbolically speaking, it signifies the attempt to square the circle into an ordered or auspicious whole. Derived from Sanskrit, swastika [literally means](#) "that which is associated with well-being". It thereby conveys the logic of reciprocal behavior (moral relation between living things) and acts as a reminder that the source of evil remains our own conceptions of 'good' .