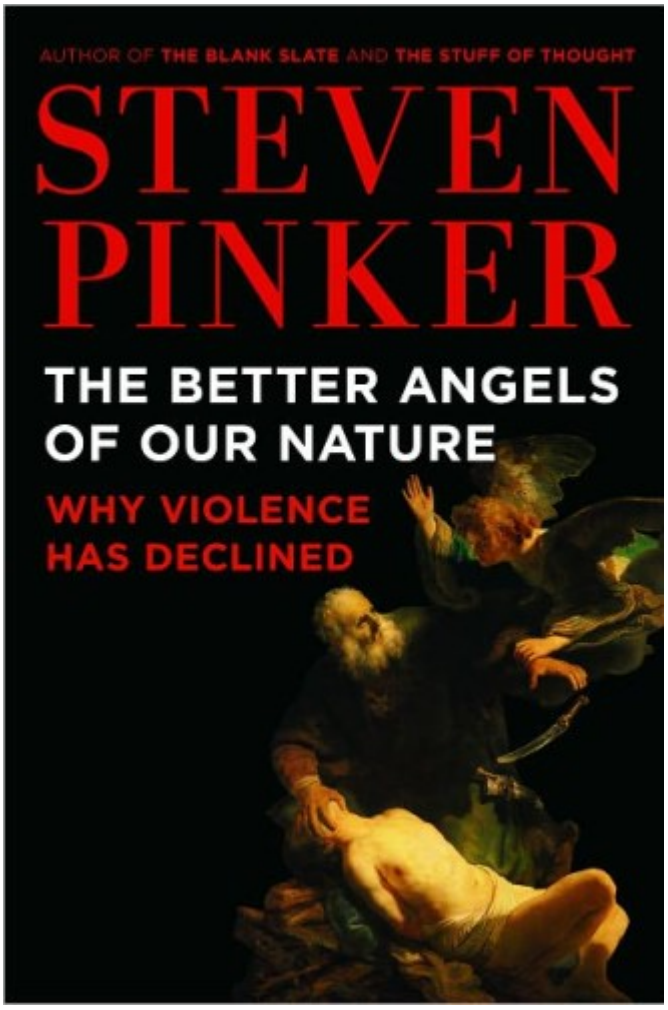
The Better Angels of Our Nature, by Steven Pinker

reviewed by Amy Frykholm in the June 27, 2012 issue

In Review



The Better Angels of Our Nature

By Steven Pinker
Viking

Taking a long look back through human history, Steven Pinker draws an overarching conclusion: human beings are becoming less violent. To make his case, he draws from work in many areas of history, philosophy, sociology and psychology. He casts

a very wide net, trying to think on both the scale of millennia and the scale of the individual human. By the time I finished *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, I wasn't so much convinced as overwhelmed. I felt like I had been at a dinner party where one guest had done all the talking about everything he knows.

Pinker's book can be divided roughly into three parts. In the historical section, he identifies three large-scale developments in human history that led, he argues, to a lessening of violence: the move of humans into cities and onto farms, the development of the nation-state in Europe and the philosophical Enlightenment, also in Europe. In the second section, Pinker tries to work both historically and with contemporary social science to show that in the past 50 years violence has decreased remarkably worldwide, and especially in Europe and the United States. He calls this "The Long Peace" and "The New Peace." In the book's third and by far the most interesting and nuanced section, Pinker looks into the psychology of human violence and the psychology of nonviolence, speculating on human nature and the human future.

Running through the book is one theme that unlocks everything else: we are becoming less violent because of the development of reason. The breakthrough for Western Europe was in the philosophical Enlightenment:

> People started to place a higher value on human life. Part of this newfound appreciation was an emotional change: a habit of identifying with the pains and pleasures of others. And another part of this was an intellectual and moral change: a shift from valuing souls to valuing lives. . . . This gradual replacement of lives for souls as the locus of moral value was helped along by the ascendancy of skepticism and reason.

Pinker makes this move rhetorically many times in different sections of the book, and it is a frustrating one because the repetition never deepens understanding. Colonial and postcolonial thought, feminist critique of the Enlightenment and moral philosophy's question "Whose Justice, Whose Rationality?" are ignored. By the end, I could only think that the aim was to convince readers that all people could, would and should think like Steven Pinker, and that if they did the world would be a better place.

Pinker's philosophical agenda hampers his reading of history. He moves at such a quick pace through so much history that he appears to be working anecdotally. Even

his graphs and charts seem to represent rhetorical feints and dodges rather than hard evidence.

Take, for example, his romp through the Bible. He begins, “The Bible is one long celebration of violence.” It is true that the Bible contains horrific depictions of violence. I don’t object to Pinker’s drawing our attention to it. But he leaps through the Bible, touching on its goriest details, with no self-awareness and very little biblical scholarship referenced in the notes. I would not expect Pinker, a psychologist by training, to become an expert in the Bible for the purpose of writing this book. But I did expect a gesture toward a field of knowledge and opinion that includes 5,000 years of midrash and exegesis. What he offers instead is an anecdotal race through texts that loses in complexity what it gains in momentum.

He concludes that he really has no idea why people would cling to this account of humanity, which is “staggering in its savagery.” He writes that contemporary religious people’s reverence for the Bible is “purely talismanic,” that they “pay it lip service as a symbol of morality, while getting their actual morality from more modern principles.” Pinker does not unpack what he means by “actual morality” until 500 pages later, and he does not back up with any data his account of how people read the Bible. By then he has moved on to anecdotes from the Roman Empire. Later he claims that Martin Luther King Jr. “rejected mainstream Christian theology and drew his inspiration from Gandhi, secular Western philosophy and renegade humanistic theologians.” His treatment of nearly every event he considers is similarly biased toward his worldview without much thoughtfulness.

Rhetorically, Pinker has worked himself into a difficult spot: every event in all of history has to be read within the totalizing force of his narrative. If it doesn’t fit his thesis, it must be explained away. If it does fit, it must be turned from an example to the basis of a generality. Explaining away the Holocaust, recent genocides and a 50-year saga of American-led violent conflicts is a neat trick, but I didn’t find it convincing. In the end, he has not proven that violence has declined for everyone everywhere. Instead he has suggested the possibility that current circumstances in this or that country may or may not be a blip on the historical radar that may or may not indicate an overall reduction in violence if more of us become scientists and read Hobbes.

The book improves considerably when Pinker turns from history to psychology. In this section he offers a nuanced portrait of violence, undoing the monolithic concept

that has driven the book so far. He writes that “human nature accommodates motives that impel us to violence, like predation, dominance and vengeance, but also motives that—under the right circumstances—impel us toward peace, like compassion, fairness, self-control, and reason.” He uses a number of studies in behavioral and neural psychology to explore how the brain responds to stimuli and to discuss what creates impulses to violence as diverse as hunting, revenge and genocide. A lot of this is familiar territory. For example, we already know that humans cannot be divided neatly into two categories, the good and the bad; that people respond with surprising submission to authority, even when they disagree morally with what authorities are saying; and that men are more likely than women to respond violently to certain stimuli.

Fascinatingly, the psychology of nonviolence appears to be more complicated than the psychology of violence. In contrast to the relatively straightforward adrenalin and testosterone hit of revenge, Pinker points us to chemical and neurological interrelations in the case of something like empathy: “The overall picture that has emerged from the study of the compassionate brain is that there is no empathy center with empathy neurons, but complex patterns of activation and modulation that depend on perceivers’ interpretation of the straits of another person and the nature of their relationship with that other person.”

If this is the case, then it suggests that there are both positive and negative trends on the question of violence. For example, human interrelation is becoming increasingly self-evident—Pinker calls this the “expanding circle.” That does seem like psychological development in a compassionate direction. On the other hand, modern technological tendencies toward individuation can be troubling. One might argue that the cost of our expanding connections may be the loss of depth.

Toward the end of the book, Pinker wrestles with the question of whether he is discussing an evolutionary shift toward a reduction in violence or a change in social mores. The book is heading toward an assertion that reason is the paramount virtue that can explain why violence has declined, so he wants to determine why we are becoming more reasonable. Is it occurring biologically and evolutionarily or as a result of shifting understandings given to us by science and humanistic philosophy? He does not neatly resolve this tension but leans toward the latter explanation, saying the former can’t be asserted at this historical juncture.

Pinker is intrigued, for example, by the rapid growth in IQ scores across the board since 1910, something known as the Flynn Effect. “The Flynn Effect has been found in thirty countries, including some in the developing world,” he writes. After a great deal of wrangling with these numbers and what they might mean, he concludes that at the very least the rise of IQ scores is evidence that “scientific reasoning infiltrated from the schoolhouse and other institutions into everyday thinking.” We are getting smarter, he says. And smarter people are less violent.

These last two statements are frustrating. What does Pinker mean by *smarter*? Can smartness be equated with reason? Is smartness really a function of an IQ score? And is there really a correlation between higher IQ scores and lower levels of violence? Pinker says that there is and offers moderately convincing evidence, but given that Pinker has not adequately addressed the dark side of reason, I remain skeptical.

I do not necessarily disagree with Pinker. For example, I think that education can have a powerful effect on human societies and is likely to reduce violence. But I also have the odd perception that Pinker’s book is itself an act of violence—a totalizing, numbing, monolithic attempt to think everything at once, to pile on evidence in order to crowd out any voice that says, “But wait a minute!” and to hoard all remaining space for himself. If you don’t agree with Pinker, or you are not sure you agree, it is probably because you are unenlightened and brutish or just not very smart, like all those people in the Middle Ages.