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Of those books that are selected for consideration, some are merely listed, others are given brief notice, most receive critical reviews, and a few are featured in lead reviews. Listings, without comments, are mainly to inform the reader that the books have appeared; examples are books whose titles are self-explanatory, such as dictionaries and taxonomic revisions, or that are reprints of earlier publications, or are new editions of well-established works. Unsigned brief notices, written by one of the editors, may be given to such works as anthologies or symposium volumes that are organized in a fashion that makes it possible to comment meaningfully on them. Regular reviews are more extensive evaluations and are signed by the reviewers. The longer lead reviews consider books of special significance. Each volume reviewed becomes the property of the reviewer. Most books not reviewed are donated to libraries at Stony Brook University or other appropriate recipients.

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ANGELS AND DEMONS

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A review of
THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE: WHY
VIOLENCE HAS DECLINED.

By Steven Pinker. New York: Viking (Penguin Group). \$40.00. xxix + 802 p.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-0-670-02295-3. 2011.

History is horrible stuff. The written record put together over the last 5000 odd years tells a story of rape, torture, murder, genocide, civil wars, and wars of conquest. “[P]ut all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty

for yourselves,” Deuteronomy (20:13–14) ordered; and Achilles acted on the same sorts of orders in Homer’s Troy.

Life is less awful, now, for many of us. Up to 70 million people may have died in the two World Wars, and more than 70 million may have died under the regimes of Stalin and Mao. But, in some places, the per capita risks have fallen off. That trend may have started with the Pacification Process that followed the rise of the first states. It continued with the Civilizing Process that followed feudalism in Europe, the Humanitarian Revolution that

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followed the growth of modern European nations, the Long Peace that followed the last World War, the New Peace that followed the Cold War, and the Rights Revolutions—civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, gay rights, and animal rights—that are going on now.

In no less than 83 figures and four maps, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* documents the decline of violence in the modern West. People in nonstate societies—from Amazonia to New Guinea—are much more likely to die in a war than people in modern states. And people in 20th-century England were much less likely to die of homicide than people in 12th-century England—where homicide data were first systematically collected. Since the end of the Middle Ages, judicial torture has been abolished in countries from England to Bohemia to Russia to the U.S.; and since the end of the last World War, no one has resorted to nuclear force. Fewer soldiers have died in battle since the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s. In our lifetimes, hate crimes against gays, domestic violence, and assault and intimidation against African Americans have decreased in the United States. The figures and maps in this book make a dramatic case that, over the last several hundred years, campaigns against violence in western Europe and the U.S. have paid off.

Steven Pinker was a teenage anarchist once. Then, in October of 1969, the Montreal police went on strike. All hell broke loose. There were riots and lootings; buildings were burned and a couple of people were murdered. That left him with a lasting impression that human nature might have a dark side (Zimmer 2011). And with a persistent conviction that the great sea monster of the Book of Job—the Leviathan, with terrible teeth, who breathed fire and ruled over all the children of pride—might help keep it repressed.

There are references to a Leviathan throughout this volume. When Leviathans impose peace, war is followed by law—so Hobbes argued, and Pinker agrees. Night raids and castle sieges give way to circuit courts and sheriffs. Leviathans become arbiters of justice and punishment dispensers. Anarchy encourages violence; but the law, in the best of all possible worlds, makes the violence stop.

The problem, as Pinker knows, is that Leviathans are not always nice. Back at the beginning of history, when the first civilizations rose up, they most definitely were not. After establishing an empire in wars from Iberia to Asia Minor, Roman emperors filled their civil service with slaves and had little respect for human life. Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, had Claudius, the stammering emperor, put at least 35 senators and 300 knights to death—with other subjects to the number of the grains of sand and the specks of dust (Seneca, *Apolocyntosis*:13–14). And it was not any better in imperial China, where the Han Dynasty scribe, Sima Qian, remembered the First August Emperor of Qin, who subjugated the territories of Zhao, Yan, Wei, Qi, Chu, and Han, then had weapons from all over his empire melted down. But like the *Pax Romana*, and other *paxes*, the Chinese peace ushered in an autocrat. Scholars with bad ideas were buried alive or castrated—like Sima Qian; and 700,000 convicts and castrated subjects were transported to Mount Li to work on the First Emperor’s tomb, where the terracotta army with their crossbows were left behind (Sima Qian, *Shi ji*:6). In all of the first states, from the Far East to the Far West, fear of the enemy without yielded to fear of the enemy within.

The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes had royalist leanings and royalist friends. He tutored the future King of England, Charles II, in mathematics while he was living as an exile in Paris; and he rewarded him with a handwritten copy of his *Leviathan* when it was issued in 1651. The head of Charles I had been removed (on parliamentary order) two years before; and it was Hobbes’s job to see that Charles II was restored. People needed a common power to keep them all in awe, he wrote, or their lives would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. “This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God*, to which we owe under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence” (Hobbes [1651] 1996: 2.17). To the thousands of men who lost their lives in the British Civil Wars, those words must have seemed harsh. To the Merrie Monarch—who filled his father’s palaces with mistresses and had dissenters’ heads—they would have been sweet. But as it turned

out, the absolutist reaction was short. Just 28 years after Charles II was invited back to England, his younger brother, James II, was thrown out. And the trend toward egalitarianism resumed.

Over the last few years, as the millennium turned, a number of evolutionists have addressed the recent improvements in human life, and made efforts to explain them. Peter Singer, the philosopher, has been impressed with the elevation of human reason (Singer 1981). Francis Fukuyama, the political scientist and nation builder, has made a case for the imposition of institutions (Fukuyama 1992, 2011). Robert Wright, the *New York Times* diavlogger, has talked about the growth of interconnectedness with communications and, eventually, the Internet (Wright 2000). Gregory Clark, the British economist, has argued for the genetic contribution of hardworking shopkeepers in late Medieval England (Clark 2007). Matt Ridley, the banker, has emphasized the spread of trade (Ridley 2010). And Steven Pinker, the linguist, likes the republic of books.

The humanitarians who kept records on homicide rates in England and New England kept records on the rise of literacy, too. And the figures are mirror images of each other. As people were becoming less violent over the last few centuries in the West, they were publishing, borrowing, buying, and reading more books. They were expanding their circle of empathy, understanding what it was like to be a sexually harassed servant in *Pamela's* England, or a London orphan like *Oliver Twist*, or a slave in the American south of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or a Holocaust victim like *Anne Frank*. They were losing their parochialism, absorbing evidence and ideas from other places and times. From the Enlightenment to the Flynn Effect, people have become better informed and, by a variety of measures, more intelligent. That should make them a better electorate and their governments more just.

Pinker is undoubtedly right. There is no question that, since Gutenberg, literacy has become much more common. But so have trade, communications, national institutions, and other kinds of education. A problem for historians on the rise of democracy after the 15th century is that everything seems to have changed at the same time. The arts flourished with the Re-

naissance; the sciences flourished with Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and others in the Age of Reason; the faithful were emancipated from church abuses with the Reformations; and British, American, and French subjects were emancipated from Kings Louis XVI, George III, and Charles I in the Age of Revolutions—when people stopped living with Leviathans and started running away from them.

What was the prime mover behind all that? I think the simple answer might be the discovery of two sparsely populated continents, that is, the release of ecological constraints (Betzig 2009, 2012a,b). When, in May of 1787, the representatives of millions of tired, poor, huddled European immigrants and their descendants met in Philadelphia to establish a republic, they understood that their political liberties depended on to their freedom to move. They believed that equality would continue in a country that possessed immense tracts of unpeopled and uncultivated lands; and they hoped that any constitution they drafted should encourage other men who loved liberty to continue to emigrate to the United States (Madison [1787] 1987). Not much later, in March of 1801, Thomas Jefferson famously said as much in his first inaugural address. The people of the United States had been separated by a wide ocean from the havoc on other quarters of the globe, with room enough for thousands of generations of descendants. So they were able to establish a wise and representative government, which kept them from injuring one another, but otherwise left them alone. “Sometimes it is said that man can not be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question” (Jefferson [1801] 1984).

It is a privilege to read and review any book by Steven Pinker. He is everything a great reader and writer should be. He reads deeply: Pinker knows his etymologies. He reads with enormous breadth—across linguistics, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology and, now, into the millennia of history. He writes with an unparalleled lexicon and unmatched wit; as I have often put to others, and to myself, Pinker has a voice. And he is hugely prolific. He em-

barrasses me and everybody else who reads and writes with the cleverness and sheer bulk of his work. In the less than two decades since *The Language Instinct* came out in 1994, he has published *How the Mind Works* (1997), *Words and*

Rules (1999), *The Blank Slate* (2002), *The Stuff of Thought* (2007)—and now this. Not everything in these pages may be right. But *The Better Angels of Our Nature* deserves a wide readership, and will make most of those readers smarter.

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