

## The Angels of Our Better Nature – Why Violence Has Declined

by Steven Pinker - 2011

### Preface

- The historical trajectory of violence affects not only how life is lived, but how it is understood.
- The question of whether the arithmetic sign of trends in violence is positive or negative bears on our conception of human nature.
  - The belief that violence has increased suggests that the world we made has contaminated us, perhaps irretrievably.
  - The belief that it has decreased suggests that we started off nasty and that the artifices of civilization have moved us in a noble direction.
- Our cognitive faculties predispose us to believe that we live in violent times.
  - Media follows the watchword "If it bleeds, it leads."
  - The human mind tends to estimate the probability of an event from the ease with which it can recall examples and nobody reports on death by old age.
- No one has ever successfully recruited activists to a cause by announcing that things are getting better.
- The decline of violent behavior has been paralleled by a decline in attitudes that tolerate or glorify violence, and often the attitudes lead the behavior changes.
  - From a contemporary viewpoint, we see signs of how low our behavior can sink, not of how high our standards have risen.
- The author sets out to understand the reduction in violence at many scales – in the family, in the neighborhood, between tribes and other armed factions, and among major nations and states.
  - The global trend in almost all of these scales point downward at the present time.
  - Too many kinds of violence have moved in the same direction for it all to be a coincidence and the author attempts to approach the explanation from a scientific perspective.
- A large part of the book will explore the psychology of violence and nonviolence such that we can identify the changes in our cultural and material milieu that have given our peaceable motives the upper hand.
- The author also shows how our history has engaged our psychology; showing that the more peaceful societies tend to be richer, healthier, better educated, better governed, more respectful of their women, and more likely to engage in trade.
- The most satisfying explanations of change are those that identify an exogenous trigger - those that are set in motion by forces outside the studied environment. The author will try to identify those forces that have engaged our mental faculties in different ways at different times and can thereby be said to have caused the declines in violence.
- This book is a tale of six trends, five inner demons, four better angels, and five historical forces.
- Trends
  1. Hunting, gathering, and horticultural societies were largely anarchy and took millennia to transition to the first agricultural civilizations, with cities and governments, beginning around 5000 years ago. This is called the *Pacification Process*.
    - A reduction in chronic raiding and feuding
    - There was a fivefold decrease in rates of violent death
  2. Consolidations of a patchwork of feudal territories into large kingdoms took over half a millennium and are best documented in Europe between the Middle Ages and the 20<sup>th</sup> century – known as the *Civilizing Process*.
    - Centralized authority evolved and the infrastructure of commerce developed
  3. The Age of Reason and European Enlightenment occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and had its parallel elsewhere in the world and is called the *Humanitarian Revolution*.
    - Organized movements to abolish socially sanctioned forms of violence
    - The first stirrings of systematic pacifism appeared

4. The period after World War II is known as the *Long Peace* where great powers and states in general stopped waging war on each other
  5. The *Rights Revolution* also evolved after World War II and is characterized by a growing revulsion against aggression on smaller scales. Violence against ethnic minorities, women, children, homosexuals, and animals declined.
  6. The *New Peace* is the period after the Cold War ended in 1989, where organized conflicts of all kinds have declined
- Inner Demons
    1. Aggression is the output of several psychological systems, the first being *predatory or instrumental violence* – deployed as a practical means to an end.
    2. *Dominance* is the urge for authority, prestige, glory, and power.
    3. *Revenge* fuels the moralistic urge toward retribution, punishment, and justice.
    4. *Sadism* is pleasure taken in another's suffering
    5. *Ideology* is a shared belief system, usually involving a vision of utopia, and justifies unlimited violence in pursuit of unlimited good.
  - Better Angels
    1. *Empathy* prompts us to feel the pain of others and to align their interests with our own.
    2. *Self-control* allows us to anticipate the consequences of acting on our impulses and to inhibit them accordingly.
    3. Our *moral sense* sanctifies a set of norms and taboos that govern the interaction among people in a culture and can decrease violence, but often increase it when norms are tribal, authoritarian, or puritanical.
    4. *Reason* allows us to extricate ourselves from our parochial vantage points, to reflect on the ways in which we live our lives, find ways we could be better off, and guide the application the other better angels. The focus of this book is on transformations that are strictly environmental, not genetic.
  - Historical Forces
    1. Exogenous forces that favor our peaceable motives start with the *Leviathan*, a state and judiciary with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, which can defuse the temptation of exploitative attack, inhibit the impulse for revenge, and circumvent self-serving biases.
    2. *Commerce* is a positive-sum game where everyone can win and allows the exchange of goods and ideas over longer distances and larger groups of trading partners – spreading understanding and adaptability.
    3. *Feminization* is the process in which cultures have increasingly respected the interests and values of women – violence being largely a male pastime.
    4. Increasing *cosmopolitanism*, such as literacy, mobility, and mass media can prompt people to take the perspective of people unlike themselves and to expand their circle of sympathy.
    5. The application of knowledge and rationality to human affairs – the *escalator of reason* – can force people to recognize the futility of cycles of violence and reframe violence as a problem to be solved rather than a contest to be won.
  - As one becomes aware of the decline of violence, the past seems less innocent; the present less sinister. One starts to appreciate the small gifts of coexistence that would have seemed utopian to our ancestors – i.e. the interracial family playing in the park.
  - We enjoy the peace we find today because people in past generations were appalled by the violence in their time and worked to reduce it.
  - It is the recognition of the decline of violence that best affirms our efforts to further reduce it.
  - We can obsess not just over what we have been doing wrong, but also over what we have been doing right.

The remainder of the book is a detailed examination of points brought up in the Preface. This work is academic in nature and the individual chapters exhaustively use statistics to back up all the points made above. The final chapter is used to summarize all the data covered and draw together the author's findings. Reading the preface and the last chapter will give most readers enough information to make the book worthwhile reading. Skeptics are encouraged to review chapters that deal with their particular disagreements. Since our brains are adapted to react more to things that support our prejudices and immediate observations and since we more easily remember violent actions, most reactions will at first disagree with the author's book title. This is the reason the detailed data in the chapters is so valuable. It not only makes the case for the reduction of violence, but explains why we would not naturally make this observation without all the statistics.

This is a very hard book to read casually, but would serve as an invaluable resource for anyone interested in examining human thought and society further.