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Review of *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Steven Pinker. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy.

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including students, practitioners, older adults, and their family members. It teaches how older adults have adapted to changes in living, and it reinforces that getting older is not the end of life, but rather, another stage of life that can be embraced.

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Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Viking (2011). \$40.00 (hardcover).

Steven Pinker is a natural provocateur. In *The Blank Slate* (2002), he took on social constructionists who deny the importance of human nature in shaping behavior. In his remarkably ambitious new book, Pinker, a cognitive scientist, broadens his focus to essentially all of history to make the case that, in the 21st century, humans are much less violent than they have ever been. In view of the horrors of the first half of the 20th century, and more recent threats of nuclear war, global terrorism, and high-tech mass murder, this contention at first seems incredible, even cavalier and callous.

What's the evidence? Pinker supports his claim by deploying reams of data that demonstrate that the rate of violence per capita has fallen consistently over the past decades and centuries, despite nasty upticks such as the world wars of nearly a century ago. He displays charts and graphs across a wide range of violent domains—homicide, interstate and civil wars, genocide, domestic violence, child abuse, among others—to reveal similar patterns of decline not just over centuries, but even within the 20th century and the early 21st. Although he readily concedes that the data may not always be reliable, the fact that evidence from so many different domains points in the same direction suggests that the trend away from violence is real and substantial. Whether it is irreversible is, of course, unknowable.

It is not that human nature has changed. We remain, in Frans de Waal's formulation, a "bipolar ape" capable of behaving both cooperatively and selfishly. What has changed, of course, are social conditions. Pinker identifies a number of key historical transitions that have facilitated a less violent society:

the emergence of the state associated with the shift from hunter-gathers to settled agriculture; the rise and consolidation of nation-states beginning around 500 years ago; the humanitarian revolution, e.g., the abolition of slavery and judicial torture, resulting from the Enlightenment in the 18th century; the nuclear peace and the spread of democracy and trade in the wake of devastation of the Second World War; the end of the Cold War that eliminated the plague of proxy wars in developing countries; and the human rights revolution since 1945 that has led to significant advances in the treatment of women, children, racial-ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and gays and lesbians.

Pinker argues that each of these historical developments promoted, in Lincoln's famous phrase, the "better angels of our nature," and this has led to declining violence. Why? He points to four underlying causal factors: the advance of government, commerce and trade, cosmopolitanism, and reason. Government, particularly liberal democracy, establishes a monopoly of legitimate violence. Commerce turns potential foes into trading partners for whom war is folly. Cosmopolitanism, deriving from our increasingly interconnected world, fosters empathy and tolerance. Finally, the growth of literacy, education and modernity itself has made us more reflective, less fatalistic about death and destruction, more motivated to improve ourselves and our world, and more willing to pursue alternatives to violence. Although fundamentalist movements have arisen to reject these developments, they can at worst only slow the tide of modernity.

Better Angels can be viewed as part of a spate of recent books that seek to challenge a mood of pessimism regarding the state of the world, such as Greg Easterbrook's *The Progress Paradox* (2003), Matt Ridley's *The Rational Optimist* (2010), and Charles Kenny's *Getting Better* (2011). Of course, global warming continues unabated, the threat of nuclear war and terrorism remains alarmingly real, the world economy is chronically mismanaged, and a billion people continue living in grinding poverty. But it is important to recognize the progress we have in fact made, not only to combat paralyzing despair but to identify key factors that lead to social betterment.

The problem, without question, is that the good news could lull us into complacency. In a January 2012 letter to *The*

New York Times, Robert Jay Lifton, chronicler of 20th century horrors, offers an important note of caution. While acknowledging Pinker's contribution to our understanding of violence, he reminds us that technological advances in mass killing, by separating perpetrators from victims both geographically and psychologically, have led the human race to a truly dangerous precipice. *Better Angels* is a masterful achievement, but we should take our Pinker with a grain of Lifton. If we are to repair the world, we need to see clearly both its light and its shadows.

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