The Better Angels of Our Nature

Steven Pinker



The Book in 60 Seconds

Steven Pinker's The Better Angels of Our Nature, published in 2011, makes a large and surprising claim: violence, in almost every measurable form, has declined over the long sweep of human history, and it may be the most important development that has ever happened to our species. Murder, war, slavery, torture, corporal punishment, cruelty to animals, and violence against women and children were all far more common in the past than they are today, not only in absolute terms but as a share of the population at risk of suffering them. Pinker does not argue that human nature has changed, or that we have become saints. He argues that history has gradually brought out the better parts of a complicated human nature — empathy, self-control, moral reasoning, and a sense of fairness — while taming and restraining the worse parts: predation, dominance, revenge, sadism, and tribal ideology. Better institutions, wider trade, literacy, cosmopolitan contact, and the spread of reason have helped ordinary people live in ways that earlier generations would have found almost unimaginably peaceful. The book is optimistic, but it is not naive. Pinker insists that the decline could reverse, that progress is never automatic, and that understanding why violence fell is the best way to keep it falling.

The Central Argument

The central argument has three parts. First, the decline is real. Across many different kinds of violence, and across many different time scales, the trend points downward when you measure it correctly. Second, the decline was not caused by a single invention or leader. It emerged from several long historical processes that reinforced one another over centuries. Third, the explanation lies in psychology as much as in politics. Human beings have always contained motives that lead toward violence and motives that lead away from it. History changed the incentives, the norms, and the habits of thought that decide which motives win on a given day.

Pinker is careful about what he is not claiming. He is not claiming that modern life is free of violence, or that a single war, genocide, or crime is unimportant because the overall rate is lower. A lower rate still leaves millions of victims, and for any victim the statistics are irrelevant. He is not claiming that people in the past were stupid or uniformly brutal, or that people today are morally superior in every way. Many earlier societies contained kindness, restraint, and wisdom, and many modern societies contain cruelty and indifference. He is claiming something narrower and more testable: if you pick a person at random, in a given year, the chance that that person will die violently, be enslaved, be tortured as a routine legal punishment, or live under constant threat of raiding and feud is much lower today than it was in most earlier eras.

That claim depends on measurement, and Pinker spends a great deal of time on it because it is where most misunderstandings begin. Raw counts mislead. The Second World War killed tens of millions of people, a number larger than the death toll of most earlier wars, but the world population in the nineteen forties was also far larger than it had ever been before. To compare danger across eras, you have to ask how likely violence was for the people who lived then. Historians call this a per-capita rate: deaths per hundred thousand people per year, or the share of all deaths caused by violence. By that measure, many pre-state societies, medieval towns, and early modern kingdoms were extraordinarily dangerous by modern standards, even though their absolute death tolls were smaller because there were fewer people alive to kill.

Pinker also argues that we misjudge the past because of how memory and news work. We remember dramatic modern atrocities in vivid detail, with photographs, film, and first-person accounts. The routine violence of earlier centuries left fewer images and often went unrecorded as anything unusual. Torture was a public spectacle, executions were entertainment, and beating children, servants, wives, and animals was treated as normal discipline. When we romanticize the past as simpler and gentler, we are usually forgetting how much everyday cruelty was built into law, custom, and family life. The book asks the reader to replace nostalgia and headlines with records: burial sites, court documents, homicide statistics, battle-death data, laws, manners manuals, novels, and changing attitudes recorded over time.

The Evidence

The evidence is organized as a series of declines, each on a different scale of time. Taken together, they form the empirical spine of the book.

Violence in Prehistory and Early States

Pinker begins deep in the past, with archaeological evidence from burial sites, skeletal injuries, and ethnographic studies of non-state societies. The picture is contested, and he acknowledges that no single site proves a universal rate. But across many sites, a substantial share of skeletons show signs of violent death — crushed skulls, embedded arrowheads, and marks consistent with scalping or dismemberment. In a number of well-studied non-state groups, violent death accounted for a striking share of adult deaths, often in the range of ten to twenty percent, and sometimes higher in particular places and periods. Raiding for land, livestock, revenge, and status was not an occasional breakdown of order. It was a recurring feature of life without a central authority able to punish attackers and settle disputes.

The first states and civilizations reduced some of that chaos, though at a price. A king or empire could suppress private feuds and raiding within its borders, but it could also conquer, enslave, and massacre on a scale no village could match. Pinker calls the early reduction the Pacification Process: as Leviathan — a government with a monopoly on legitimate force — took hold, the constant low-level killing of tribe against tribe and clan against clan tended to fall, even as organized warfare and harsh state punishments remained.

The European Homicide Decline

The clearest long record comes from Europe. Drawing on the work of criminologists and historians who compiled court and coroners' records, Pinker shows that homicide rates in European towns and regions in the late Middle Ages were often twenty to fifty deaths per hundred thousand people per year, and in some places considerably higher. By the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most of Western Europe had rates around one per hundred thousand per year. That is a decline of roughly thirty to fifty fold, unfolding over five to eight centuries.

The decline was not smooth. It moved at different speeds in different regions, it stalled, and it sometimes reversed for a time. But the direction over the long run is hard to dispute because the records are local, plentiful, and independent of one another. England, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries all show the same broad pattern: a violent late medieval world of knife fights over insults, family feuds, and casual brawls gradually giving way to a world in which homicide became rare, shocking, and heavily punished. Pinker links this to the growth of state courts, commerce, and new codes of manners that taught even aristocrats to restrain impulses that their grandfathers would have acted on without shame. He calls this broader transformation the Civilizing Process, borrowing from the sociologist Norbert Elias.

War Between States

War is harder to measure than homicide because it is rarer, more clustered, and dominated by a few enormous conflicts. Pinker does not pretend otherwise. He shows that great-power wars became less frequent over the centuries, that wars between the largest states grew rarer after nineteen forty five, and that battle deaths per capita fell sharply in the second half of the twentieth century compared with its first half.

He gives particular attention to what historians call the Long Peace: the period after the Second World War in which the great powers — the states capable of the most destructive wars — did not fight one another directly. During the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union competed through proxies, espionage, and arms races, but they avoided the kind of direct great-power war that had twice consumed Europe in the first half of the century. Since then, interstate wars have become uncommon, conquest has largely stopped being a legitimate or successful way for a state to grow, and most wars that do occur are civil wars within states, which also declined in number and lethality after a peak around the end of the Cold War, even though they remain brutal where they happen.

Pinker is honest that war statistics follow a heavy-tailed pattern: a single future catastrophe could change the averages, and the absence of a great-power war for several decades does not prove such a war is impossible. His point is about the record so far, and about the norms and institutions that made conquest disreputable, borders more settled, and nuclear deterrence and international organizations part of everyday statecraft.

The Rights Revolutions

From the nineteen fifties onward, Pinker traces a set of faster changes he calls the Rights Revolutions. Violence and discrimination that had long been tolerated against specific groups came under sustained moral and legal attack: racial minorities, women, children, gay people, and animals. Lynching in the United States, once public and photographically celebrated by its perpetrators, became a prosecuted crime and a source of national shame. Legal segregation fell. Capital punishment receded in most democracies and was abolished outright in many countries. Corporal punishment of children, once near universal and recommended by parenting authorities, declined and was banned in a growing number of nations. Marital rape was recognized as a crime. Laws against cruelty to animals expanded, and practices once treated as harmless entertainment were restricted or ended.

Related to this is what Pinker calls the Humanitarian Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when practices that had been routine for millennia — judicial torture, slavery, dueling, cruel and spectacular executions, and persecution for heresy and witchcraft — began to be questioned in print and then abolished in law across much of the West. The abolition of slavery, first of the transatlantic slave trade and then of slavery itself in country after country during the nineteenth century, is one of the clearest examples: a profitable, ancient institution defended as natural and necessary was dismantled within a few generations because moral arguments, organized activism, and political pressure made it indefensible.

The Historical Forces

Pinker proposes five historical forces that, in different combinations, drove these declines. None works alone, and none guarantees peace.

The first is Leviathan: an effective state and judiciary that monopolize violence, punish murder and assault predictably, and give people a way to settle disputes without revenge. When a would-be killer expects to be caught and punished, and when a victim's family can go to court instead of taking up arms, the logic of the feud weakens. States can be violent themselves, and Pinker does not romanticize them, but a state constrained by law generally kills fewer of its own citizens through private disorder than a stateless territory loses to raiding and vendetta.

The second is commerce. Trade turns strangers into partners whose continued existence is valuable. Killing a customer, a supplier, or a trading partner destroys future gains, while cooperation compounds them. As markets widened, more people found themselves in positive-sum exchanges in which the other side was worth more alive than dead. Commerce also spread habits of negotiation, contract, and trust among people who shared neither kinship nor religion.

The third is feminization, by which Pinker means the growing influence of women and of values historically associated with women's experience in cultures that had glorified male honor, martial glory, and dominance. As women gained education, economic standing, and political voice, societies tended to move away from cultures of violent honor and toward norms that prize care, compromise, and the protection of children. The claim is not that women are incapable of violence, but that a culture which respects women's perspectives is less likely to treat aggression as the highest proof of worth.

The fourth is cosmopolitanism: the widening circle of people with whom we communicate, travel, trade, and sympathize. Printing, literacy, roads, migration, mass media, and later electronic communication exposed people to lives unlike their own. It becomes harder to treat a distant group as vermin or demons when you have read their stories, eaten in their restaurants, worked beside them, or watched their children play. Contact does not always produce sympathy — it can produce friction — but over the long run it has expanded the range of people counted as fully human.

The fifth is reason, or what Pinker calls the escalator of reason: the cumulative effect of literacy, education, science, and public debate. Literate people can encounter arguments against cruelty, examine evidence, imagine counterfactuals, and notice inconsistencies in their own moral rules. If it is wrong to torture a stranger's child, the reasoning mind eventually asks why it was ever right to torture anyone's. Reason does not make people angels, but it gives moral progress a ratchet: once an argument against slavery or torture has been stated clearly and widely, it is hard to unthink, and later generations inherit it as common sense.

Inner Demons and Better Angels

The book's title comes from Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, delivered as the United States moved toward civil war, in which he appealed to the better angels of our nature. Pinker uses that phrase for the faculties that incline us away from violence: empathy, the ability to feel something of what another person feels; self-control, the ability to restrain an impulse; the moral sense, our intuitions about fairness, harm, purity, and loyalty; and reason, the ability to step back, deliberate, and revise our own judgments.

Against them stand the inner demons. Pinker groups them into several recurring motives. Predation is violence as a tool: using force to take land, goods, mates, or safety. Dominance is violence for status: the need to be feared, respected, and never humiliated, which drives duels, gang wars, and honor killings. Revenge is violence as moral bookkeeping: the powerful urge to make a wrongdoer suffer in proportion to a wrong, an urge that feels like justice in the moment but easily spirals into feuds that outlive the original offense. Sadism is violence for pleasure, rarer than the others but real, and amplified when cruelty is rewarded with laughter or status. Ideology is the most dangerous demon at scale: a utopian or tribal belief system that divides the world into the righteous and the irredeemable, and that can persuade otherwise ordinary people that mass killing is a duty. Ideologies supply the shared narrative that turns private demons into organized violence.

The important point is that both lists belong to the same species. Pinker rejects the idea that violence comes only from a few monstrous individuals, and equally rejects the idea that humans are naturally peaceful and corrupted only by civilization. The archaeological and historical record cuts against both simple stories. Instead, he argues, circumstances decide which faculties dominate. A society with reliable courts, widespread literacy, trade with strangers, and norms against cruelty recruits the better angels hour by hour. A society with collapsed institutions, humiliation, scarcity, and a dehumanizing ideology recruits the demons just as reliably. That is why the decline of violence is both encouraging and fragile: the angels won under particular conditions, and those conditions have to be maintained.

Pinker also discusses the moral circle, an idea associated with the philosopher Peter Singer. Over history, the circle of beings whose interests we take seriously has expanded: from kin, to tribe, to fellow citizens, to all human beings, and increasingly to animals. Each expansion was once dismissed as sentimental or absurd, and each later came to seem obvious. The expansion does not happen by moral magic. It follows the forces already described: contact, stories, arguments, laws, and the practical experience of living alongside people once treated as outsiders.

Key Ideas Explained Plainly

Per-capita measurement is the book's methodological key. Always ask, per how many people, over how long? A city with ten murders among a hundred thousand residents is safer than a village with five murders among five hundred residents, even though the city's count is higher. Much public argument about whether the world is getting worse quietly switches between counts and rates, and Pinker insists on keeping them separate.

The idea of the Civilizing Process explains how manners matter. Table manners, spitting, nose blowing, dueling, and public executions seem like trivial or separate topics, but Elias and Pinker connect them: as courts and cities required people to live closely with strangers and superiors, self-restraint became a daily habit, taught to children and enforced by embarrassment. A person trained from childhood to notice disgust, control appetite, and read other people's reactions is also being trained, indirectly, not to settle an insult with a knife. Manners are not morality, but they rehearse the self-control morality needs.

The Long Peace and the New Peace describe patterns after nineteen forty five. The Long Peace is the absence of direct war between great powers. The New Peace is the broader post-Cold War decline in civil wars, genocides, and battle deaths relative to population, which Pinker documented with data available up to around twenty eleven. He treats these as trends to be explained, not laws of nature, and he notes that a trend can bend without the long record behind it disappearing.

Positive-sum thinking contrasts with zero-sum thinking. In a zero-sum world, my gain is your loss, so taking from you is rational. In a positive-sum world of trade, specialization, and cooperation, we can both gain, so keeping you alive, healthy, and trusting is rational. Much of the decline of violence, in Pinker's telling, is the slow replacement of zero-sum habits — plunder, tribute, conquest, honor — with positive-sum institutions.

Finally, there is the idea that moral progress can be real without being inevitable. Abolishing torture as a legal tool, ending legal slavery, and extending rights to women did not happen because the calendar advanced. They happened because specific people argued, organized, published, marched, legislated, and enforced. Remembering that progress required work is, for Pinker, an argument for continuing the work rather than assuming the outcome.

How to Approach This Book

This is a long book, at more than eight hundred pages in many editions including notes and references, and it rewards a deliberate approach rather than a race to the finish. Read the introduction and the first chapter on the history of violence carefully, because they establish the measurement habits the rest of the book depends on. If the statistical passages slow you down, keep going rather than stopping: Pinker usually restates the conclusion of a chart in plain words in the surrounding text, and the argument does not require you to verify every dataset on first reading.

A useful strategy is to read one decline at a time — homicide, war, slavery and torture, the rights revolutions — and pause to ask two questions after each: what is the rate, and what changed to move it? Readers who enjoy argument may want to keep a short list of claims they find least convincing, because the final third of the book, on inner demons, better angels, and historical forces, is where Pinker answers objections and where your own list becomes most useful. The psychology chapters are the most demanding and also the most rewarding; they connect the large historical story to the ordinary experience of anger, humiliation, empathy, and self-control.

Do not feel obliged to agree in order to benefit. Even critics of the book often concede that the homicide and rights data changed how they think about the past. Read it the way you would read any ambitious work of synthesis: as a map drawn by one learned, opinionated guide, to be checked against other maps, but not to be dismissed before you have seen what it shows. A notebook helps, and so does reading with a friend, because many passages — on punishment, parenting, war, and animal welfare — are natural conversation starters.

Memorable Lines

Pinker opens by observing, in a line often quoted from the book, that we live in what he calls the most peaceable era in our species' existence — a claim he then spends the book defending with data rather than asking the reader to accept on faith.

His summary of the moral stakes is equally compact: The decline of violence may be the most significant and least appreciated development in the history of our species.

The title itself preserves Lincoln's phrase, the better angels of our nature, which Pinker borrows to name the faculties of empathy, self-control, morality, and reason that history can strengthen.

Fair Criticisms

The book attracted serious criticism, and a fair reader should know the main lines of it. Some are statistical. Critics, most prominently the mathematician and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb, together with the statistician Pasquale Cirillo, argued that war deaths follow such an extreme heavy-tailed distribution that a few decades without a catastrophic war cannot establish a true decline in the underlying risk. On this view, the Long Peace might be a lucky interval within a process that still contains rare, civilization-scale events, and Pinker's language sometimes sounds more confident than the mathematics of rare disasters allows. Pinker replied that his claim concerns observed rates and changing norms, not a guarantee about tail risk, but the exchange is a genuine reminder that war data are unlike homicide data: the sample is small and the worst cases dominate.

Other criticisms are about what counts as violence. Scholars influenced by the sociologist Johan Galtung's idea of structural violence argue that Pinker's focus on direct, physical, intentional violence misses slower harms built into institutions: poverty that shortens lives, preventable disease, exploitative labor, environmental damage, and the lasting effects of colonialism and incarceration. A society can have a low homicide rate while tolerating conditions that quietly injure or kill large numbers of people, and critics charge that the book's optimism depends on drawing the boundary of violence narrowly. Defenders respond that direct violence is a coherent and important category and that broadening the term to cover every social ill would make the trend impossible to measure at all — but the debate usefully asks readers to notice what any single metric leaves out.

Historians and anthropologists have raised further points. Some dispute particular estimates for violent death in specific prehistoric or tribal societies, noting that burial samples are small and may not represent whole populations. Others argue that the twentieth century's state violence — world wars, genocides, forced famines, and bombing of civilians — sits uneasily in a story of decline, and that Pinker's per-capita framing, while statistically standard, can feel morally evasive when applied to events like the Holocaust, whose horror is not reduced by noting world population. Still others note a Western tilt in the sources: the best long records come from Europe, so the best-documented decline is European, and the global story is assembled from thinner evidence. Pinker addresses many of these objections in the book itself, and his data on homicide and legal cruelty are widely regarded as strong, but the strongest version of his thesis — a universal, continuing decline across all forms of violence — remains debated rather than settled.

Why It's on the List

The Better Angels of Our Nature appears on Bill Gates's favorites lists, and Gates has praised it publicly as one of the most important and inspiring books he has read, recommending it repeatedly to readers of his Gates Notes site and in talks about progress. It is easy to see why it appeals to him, and why it belongs on any best-books list built around his reading. Gates's public work, through his foundation and his writing on global health, energy, and poverty, is organized around a particular habit of mind: measure a problem honestly, notice that many terrible things are getting better more slowly than they should but faster than headlines suggest, and then ask what interventions moved the numbers so that more of them can be funded and spread.

Pinker's book is that habit of mind applied to the largest possible subject. It treats violence the way a public health researcher treats disease: define it, count it carefully, compare rates across places and times, and search for the conditions that lower it. For a reader who believes that data should puncture both despair and complacency, the book is bracing. It says the world has improved in a domain most people assume has only worsened, and it says so with charts that can be checked rather than with sentiment. It also flatters no one's politics completely, which Gates has noted with approval: liberals and conservatives can each find findings that support and findings that challenge their instincts.

There is a deeper appeal as well. An optimistic history grounded in evidence gives a reason to invest in the future. If violence fell because of literacy, trade, institutions, and the widening of sympathy, then funding schools, health, and stable governance is not charity in a hopeless world; it is continuing a process with a documented record of success. That is the emotional core Gates responds to: not optimism as a mood, but optimism as a conclusion argued from records, and therefore a basis for action. Readers who share that temperament will find the book energizing. Readers who do not will still find it clarifying, because even arguing against it requires engaging with the numbers it assembled.

What to Read Next

If the European homicide decline interested you most, read Norbert Elias's The Civilizing Process, the sociological classic from which Pinker borrows, for a closer look at manners, shame, and state formation. If you want the argument for expanding moral concern stated philosophically, Peter Singer's The Expanding Circle is short, clear, and directly connected to Pinker's discussion of the moral circle.

If you want Pinker's own sequel in spirit, his later book Enlightenment Now extends the data-driven case for progress to health, wealth, knowledge, and happiness, and answers some critics of this book along the way. If you want the strongest counterweight, read John Gray's essays and his book Straw Dogs for a skeptical view of progress narratives, or look up the Cirillo and Taleb statistical critique of war-decline claims and Pinker's reply, and judge the exchange for yourself.

For the history of war in a single gripping narrative, Margaret MacMillan's War: How Conflict Shaped Us offers a distinguished historian's more ambivalent account. For a ground-level view of how norms against cruelty changed, Lynn Hunt's Inventing Human Rights traces how novels, empathy, and eighteenth-century readers helped make torture and cruelty newly unthinkable — a perfect companion to Pinker's Humanitarian Revolution. Whichever direction you go, keep this book's central discipline with you: ask for the rate, ask over what period, and ask what changed. Those three questions will improve almost any argument about whether the world is getting better or worse.