

Book Reviews

The Better Angels of our Nature

By Steven Pinker

Reviewed by The Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson

Biography: The Reverend Dr (Squadron Leader) David Richardson is a graduate of the universities of Edinburgh, Belfast, Trinity College Dublin and King's College London, and a contributor to the Cambridge Dictionary of Irish Biography. Ordained in the Church of Ireland, he has served 10 years as a chaplain in the RAF at Lyneham, Odiham, Amport House, and Halton. Operational experience includes two tours of Afghanistan and a recent deployment on Op SHADER, working with both air force elements in Cyprus and training teams in Iraq.

Introduction

In this intriguing volume, Harvard professor and international prize winner Steven Pinker argues that humans have become less violent over the centuries; we may be living in the most peaceful era of all. Commencing with a diachronic survey of human cruelty, subsequent chapters analyse the factors behind the apparent decline of inhumanity. The essential thesis of the book is that through the civilizing forces of government, commerce, communication and reason, we have gradually become aware that physically harming one another can be replaced by more positive models of human interaction. Pinker concludes that the growing sophistication of the human race has made us more irenic. In an impressive sweep of scholarship, the author draws on psychology, biology, history and statistical analysis to make his case. Charts and graphs in abundance support his argument that violence is on the wane from back streets to international borders, accompanied by a smorgasbord of cultural and chronological examples. Wars have been getting less frequent and less bloody, he argues, and we are becoming a gentler species. Pinker's purview includes medieval hygiene habits, the structure of the human brain, and Kantian philosophy; the book is worth purchasing simply for the intellectual stimulus the reader will enjoy. Accessible to the curious

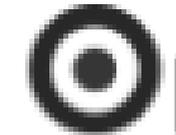
general reader, this volume offers a fascinating tour d 'horizon of the academic landscape, from laboratory to archaeological excavation and back again. From table manners to torture, Pinker argues that we have developed in such a way as to become more considerate of one another. The Whig view of history, which holds that humanity is on a steady upward trajectory to ever greater enlightenment, has clearly found a new advocate; the future can be bright, he maintains, and the 'new electronic Republic of Letters' will ultimately triumph.

Pinker's thesis, however, is best described by the Scottish legal verdict of 'not proven'. Attractive as his argument is, the statistical evidence is by no means clear-cut. Lacking consistent historical data, much of the material is extrapolated or simply implied, whilst the global conflicts of the twentieth century are described as 'unlucky samples' in a general trend towards peace. Inhabitants of Ukraine or the Balkans might be surprised to learn that the collapse of the Soviet Union had 'no discernible effect on the Long Peace'. Occasional factual errors and assertions of opinion without evidence also do little to support his argument.

Furthermore, Pinker's arbitrary and explicit limitation of the human experience to psychological, physiological, and sociological factors means that he finds it difficult to explain the apparent ease with which educated and culturally advantaged human beings will descend into gratuitous sadism when permitted. His reluctance to consider a moral absolute which lies outside and above our human constructs is perhaps the ultimate flaw in his argument. If all our values are simply conditioned by evolution and environment, then any judgments regarding the respective merits of violence and peace are similarly contingent. Even the title of the book admits that this may be more than simply an anthropocentric issue - although Pinker may find our roots in the apes, he cannot avoid the angels.

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