

The Transient Suppression of the Worst Devils of our Nature—a review of Steven Pinker’s ‘The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined’ (2012)

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ABSTRACT

This is not a perfect book, but it is unique, and if you skim the first 400 or so pages, the last 300 (of some 700) are a pretty good attempt to apply what's known about behavior to social changes in violence and manners over time. The basic topic is: how does our genetics control and limit social change? Surprisingly he fails to describe the nature of kin selection (inclusive fitness) which explains much of animal and human social life. He also (like nearly everyone) lacks a clear framework for describing the logical structure of rationality (LSR—John Searle’s preferred term) which I prefer to call the Descriptive Psychology of Higher Order Thought (DPHOT). He should have said something about the many other ways of abusing and exploiting people and the planet, since these are now so much more severe as to render other forms of violence irrelevant. Extending the concept of violence to include the global long term consequences of replication of someone’s genes, and having a grasp of the nature of how evolution works (i.e., kin selection) will provide a very different perspective on history, current events, and how things are likely to go in the next few hundred years. One might start by noting that the decrease in physical violence over history has been matched (and made possible) by the constantly increasing merciless rape of the planet (i.e., by people's destruction of their own descendants future). Pinker (like most people most of the time) is often distracted by the superficialities of culture when it’s biology that matters. See my recent reviews of Wilson’s ‘The Social Conquest of Earth’ and Nowak and Highfield’s ‘SuperCooperators’ for a brief summary of the vacuity of altruism and the operation of kin selection and the uselessness and superficiality of describing behavior in cultural terms.

This is the classic nature/nurture issue and nature trumps nurture --infinitely. What really matters is the violence done to the earth by the relentless increase in population and resource destruction (due to medicine and technology and conflict suppression by police and military). About 200,000 more people a day (another Las Vegas every 10 days, another Los Angeles every month), the 12 tons or so of topsoil going into the sea/person/year etc. mean that unless some miracle happens the biosphere and civilization will largely collapse in the next two centuries and there will be starvation, misery and violence of every kind on a staggering scale. People's manners, opinions and tendencies to commit violent acts are of no relevance unless they can do something to avoid this catastrophe, and I don't see how that is going to happen. There is no space for arguments, and no point either (yes I'm a fatalist), so I'll just make a few comments as though they were facts. Don't imagine I have a personal stake in promoting one group at the expense of others. I am 75, have no descendants and no close relatives and do not identify with any political, national or religious group and regard the ones I belong to by default as just as repulsive as all the rest.

Parents are the worst Enemies of Life on Earth and, taking the broad view of things, women are as violent as men when one considers the fact that women's violence (like most of that done by men) is largely done in slow motion, at a distance in time and space and mostly carried out by proxy -by their descendants and by men. Increasingly, women bear children regardless of whether they have a mate and the effect of stopping one woman from breeding is on average much greater than stopping one man, since they are the reproductive bottleneck. One can take the view that people and their offspring richly deserve whatever misery comes their way and (with rare exceptions) the rich and famous are the worst offenders. Meryl Streep or Bill Gates and each of their kids may destroy 50 tons of topsoil each per year for generations into the future, while an Indian farmer and his may destroy 1 ton. If someone denies it that's fine, and to their descendants I say "Welcome to Hell on Earth"(WTHOE).

The emphasis nowadays is always on Human Rights, but it is clear that if civilization is to stand a chance, Human Responsibilities must replace Human Rights. Nobody gets rights without being a responsible citizen and the first thing this means is minimal environmental destruction . The most basic responsibility is no children unless your society asks you to produce them. A society or a world that lets people breed at random will always be exploited by selfish genes until it collapses (or reaches a point where life is so horrific it's not worth living). If society continues to maintain Human Rights as primary, that's fine and to their descendants one can say with confidence "WTHOE".

Those wishing a comprehensive up to date framework for human behavior from the modern two systems view may consult my article *The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language as Revealed in Wittgenstein and Searle* 59p(2016). For all my articles on Wittgenstein and Searle see my e-book *'The Logical Structure of Philosophy, Psychology, Mind and Language in Wittgenstein and Searle* 367p (2016). Those interested in all my writings in their most recent versions may consult my e-book *Philosophy, Human Nature and the Collapse of Civilization - Articles and Reviews 2006-2016* 662p (2016).

This is not a perfect book, but it is unique, and if you skim the first 400 or so pages, the last 300 (of some 700) are a pretty good attempt to apply what's known about behavior to social changes in violence and manners over time. The basic topic is: how does our genetics control and limit social change? Surprisingly he fails to describe the nature of kin selection (inclusive fitness) which explains much of animal and human social life. He also (like nearly everyone) lacks a clear framework for describing the logical structure of rationality (LSR—John Searle's preferred term) which I prefer to call the Descriptive Psychology of Higher Order Thought (DPHOT). Mostly the criticisms given by others are nit-picking and irrelevant and, as Pinker has said, he could not write a coherent book about "bad things", nor could he give every possible reference and point of view, but he should have said at least something about the many other ways of abusing and exploiting people and the planet, since these are now so much more severe as to render other forms of violence irrelevant.

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"Helping" has to be seen from a global long term perspective. Almost all "help" that's given by individuals, organizations or countries harms others and the world in the long run and must only be given after very careful consideration. If you want to hand out money, food, medicine, etc., you need to ask what the long term environmental consequences are. If you want to please everyone all the time, that's fine and again to your descendants I say "WTHOE".

Dysgenics: endless trillions of creatures beginning with bacteria-like forms over 3 billion years ago have died to create us and all current life and this is called eugenics, evolution by natural selection or kin selection (inclusive fitness). We all have "bad genes" but some are worse than others. It is estimated that up to 50% of all human conceptions end in spontaneous abortion due to "bad genes". Civilization is dysgenic. This problem is currently trivial compared to overpopulation but getting worse by the day. Medicine, welfare, democracy, equality, justice, human rights and "helping" of all kinds have global long term dysgenic consequences which will collapse society even if population growth stops. Again if the world refuses to believe it or doesn't want to deal with it that's fine and to their (and everyone's) descendants we can say "WTHOE".

Beware the utopian scenarios that suggest doomsday can be avoided by judicious application of technologies. As they say you can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time but you can't fool mother nature any of the time. I leave you with just one example. Famous scientist Raymond Kurzweil proposed nanobots as the saviors of humankind. They would make anything we needed and clean every mess. They would even make ever better versions of themselves. They would keep us

as pets. But think of how many people treat their pets, and pets are overpopulating and destroying and becoming dysgenic almost as fast as humans (e.g. feral cats alone kill perhaps 100 billion wild animals a year). Pets only exist because we destroy the earth to feed them and we have spay and neuter clinics and euthanize the sick and unwanted ones. We practice rigorous population control and eugenics on them deliberately and by omission, and no form of life can evolve or exist without these two controls—not even bots. And what's to stop nanobots from evolving? Any change that facilitated reproduction would automatically be selected for and any behavior that wasted time or energy (i.e., taking care of humans) would be heavily selected against. What would stop the bots program from mutating into a homicidal form and exploiting all earth's resources causing global collapse? There is no free lunch for bots either and to them too we can confidently say "WTHOE".

This is where any thoughts about the world and human behavior must lead an educated person but Pinker says nothing about it. So the first 400 pages of this book can be skipped and the last 300 read as a nice summary of EP (evolutionary psychology) as of 2011. However, as in his other books and nearly universally in the behavioral sciences, there is no clear broad framework for intentionality as pioneered by Wittgenstein, Searle and many others. I have presented such a framework in my many reviews of works by and about these two natural psychological geniuses and will not repeat it here.