

# Who is Steven Pinker ?

“Is the World Getting Better or Worse?”

# Steven Pinker

- Pinker was **born in Montreal**, Quebec, in 1954, to a middle-class Jewish family
- He received a **Bachelor of Arts in psychology from McGill University** in 1976
- earned his **Doctorate of Philosophy** in experimental psychology at **Harvard** University in 1979
- From 1982 until 2003, Pinker taught at the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences at **MIT**
- As of 2003, he is the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at **Harvard**
- He is self professed **feminist, atheist**, and according to a political orientation assessment, he is **politically “neither leftist nor rightist, more libertarian than authoritarian”**
- He has published 16 books - including:  
**“The Better Angels of Our Nature - 2011”, “The Blank Slate - 2016”, “Enlightenment Now - 2018”**

# Steven Pinker TED Talk

30 April 2018

“Is the world getting better or worse, a look at the numbers”

[https://www.ted.com/talks/steven\\_pinker\\_is\\_the\\_world\\_getting\\_better\\_or\\_worse\\_a\\_look\\_at\\_the\\_numbers?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_is_the_world_getting_better_or_worse_a_look_at_the_numbers?language=en)

# Steven Pinker

Critiques - Compiled by Julian Sale Dec 2018

# George Monbiot - The Guardian (UK)

- “I am **broadly sympathetic** to his worldview.”
- “I agree with him that **scientific knowledge is a moral imperative**, and that we must use it to enhance human welfare.”
- However, in the section on the Environment, “**Pinker draws on anecdote, cherry-picking** and discredited talking points developed by anti-environmental think tanks.”
- “If the environmental crisis cannot be so easily dismissed, it threatens his argument that life is steadily improving. What looks like a relentless enhancement in human welfare **could emerge** instead as **an interlude between one form of deprivation and the next.**”

# Alessandra Montalto - The New York Times

- “Steven Pinker wants you to know humanity is doing fine. Just **don’t ask about individual humans.**”
- “There’s a **noble kernel to Pinker’s project.** He wants to discourage the kind of fatalism that leads people to think the only way forward is to tear everything down. But he seems surprisingly blind to how he fuels such fatalism by playing to the worst stereotypes.....”
- Pinker is “sympathetic to humanity in the abstract but impervious to the suffering of actual human beings.”

# Jeremy Lent - 20th May 2018

- “Steven Pinker’s ideas about progress are fatally flawed.”
- “His book has incited strong reactions, both positive and negative. On one hand, **Bill Gates** has, for example, effervesced that ‘**It’s my new favourite book of all time.**’ On the other hand, Pinker has been fiercely excoriated by a wide range of leading thinkers for writing simplistic, incoherent paean to the dominant world order.”
- “**John Grey**, in the **New Statesman**, calls it “**embarrassing**’ and ‘**feeble**”

# Jeremy Lent - 20th May 2018

- “**David Bell**, writing in **The Nation**, sees it as ‘a **dogmatic book** that offers an **oversimplified, excessively optimistic vision** of human history’”
- “**George Monbiot**, in **The Guardian**, laments the ‘**poor scholarship**’ and ‘motivated reasoning’ that ‘insults the Enlightenment principles he claims to defend’”
- **Jeremy Lent** - “I agree with much of what **Pinker** has to say. His book is stocked with seventy-five charts and graphs that provide incontrovertible evidence for centuries of progress on many fronts that should matter to all of us:” Then he calls **Pinker’s** book “**fatally flawed**”



# Summary of Rebuttals

- The main issue of most critics is his **style** and Pinker's conclusion that:  
Extrapolation of the past equates to continued 'progress' for humanity
  - They claim that it is **not intellectually rigorous**
  - They claim that technology and the era of instant communications makes it a **whole new ballgame and as such one cannot extrapolate from the past**
- Pinker's rebuttal in return:
  - That technology will provide us **even more powerful tools to tackle global problems**
  - He does acknowledge that it will require political will to do so
  - **Existential threats** (climate change, etc) still exist, but they're **not beyond our capability of solving them**

# Enlightenment Now

Is the World Getting Better or Worse?

RCMC - Debate

# Debate

1. Is the world more violent now than in the past?
2. Is the world getting better or worse?
3. Did Pinker's presentation change your mind at all?
4. Did Pinker's presentation make you more or less concerned about the future?
5. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?
6. What needs to happen to ensure continued human progress?