



BOOK REVIEW OF STEVEN PINKER'S: "THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE: WHY VIOLENCE HAS DECLINED"

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Category: **Book review**

Walter E. Block

Harold E. Wirth Eminent Scholar Chair in Economics and Professor of Economics,
College of Business Administration, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, USA

Editor's note: *This article is too large to fit into any one of our issues. But, due to its importance, we have decided to run it as a three part series. The first of these featured the introduction, the beginnings of Block's critique of Pinker (2011) and the appendix. Part II, presented here, contains most of the main body of this work. And the last appearance of this essay in three parts, in our fourth issue, will contain the author's conclusion and his voluminous bibliography. The third part of this essay you can read in the form of preview on our webpage "In the next issue" up to the July 15th, 2014.*

Part II

Here is another problem I have with our author. He states (236):

"But during the military revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, states began to form professional standing armies. They conscripted large numbers of men from a cross section of society rather than just from the dregs at the bottom. They used a combination of drill, indoctrination, and brutal punishment to train them for organized combat. And they instilled in them a code of discipline, stoicism, and valor. The result was that when two of these armies clashed, they could rack up high body counts in a hurry. "

Note he admits that it was *states* that perpetrated

all of these evils. Does this give pause for thought to Pinker? It does not. However according to my scorecard: it is anarchists, 1; government, 0.

According to Pinker (242):

"Among liberals and conservatives alike, the notion took hold that war called forth spiritual qualities of heroism, self-sacrifice, and manliness and was needed as a cleansing and invigorating therapy for effeminacy and materialism of bourgeois society. Nowadays the ideas that there could be something inherently admirable about an enterprise that is designed to kill people and destroy things seems barking mad."

Would that this were true! However, Pinker seems a bit too naïve. He reckons without taking into account that as of this writing, the U.S. has

The address of the author:

Walter E. Block

 wblock@loyno.edu



some 1,000 military bases stationed in about 160 countries (Department of Defense, 2007; Vance, 2010). He reckons without taking into account the fact that Ron Paul was widely booed at the 2011 Republican presidential debate in South Carolina for urging that we treat others the same way we would wish to be treated.⁶⁰ He reckons without taking into account Krugman (and other Keynesians) who sort of favor war. These economists are indeed “barking mad.”⁶¹

However, our author goes too far in his anti-war sentiment when he writes (245):

“... war (is) ... economically futile. Plunder may have been profitable in primitive economies, when wealth lay in finite resources like gold or land or in the handiwork of self-sufficient craftsmen. But in a world in which wealth grows out of exchange, credit, and a division of labor, conquest cannot make a conqueror richer. Minerals don't just jump out of the ground, nor does grain harvest itself, so the conqueror would still have to pay the miners to mine and the farmers to farm. In fact, he would make himself poorer, since the conquest would cost money and lives and would damage the networks of trust and cooperation that allow everyone to enjoy gains in trade. Germany would have nothing to gain by conquering Canada any more than Manitoba would have something to gain by conquering Saskatchewan.”

Surely, war mongering can sometimes, at least theoretically, pay off, if the victory is easy. Does Pinker seriously suggest that if I attack Manhattan, seize all its assets, its real estate, etc., merely based on my threat to do so, with no loss of life or property at all, I would not gain economically? Suppose I declare “war” on Pinker himself, and come to own his far more

modest assets, his home, car, etc. I would not gain? ⁶²

“Zero is the number of times that nuclear weapons have been used in conflict (since 1945)” writes pinker (249). Yes, yes. But thanks to governments many innocents have died at the hands of this exalted institution, just as assuredly as if they were directly murdered by the state as opposed to indirectly, via socialist roads, drug policies, etc.

Pinker (278) counters the claim that Nazi Germany was a democracy by characterizing it as a “dictatorship.” True enough. But that is not to deny its democratic roots. Hitler did *not* come to power through an anti-democratic coup de etat. Rather, his rise to the fuehrership came about *strictly* through the democratic process. Our author has a truncated notion of democracy. He claims (280) it is suspect to describe a given country in that manner if slavery is present, if women are not given the franchise. But prisoners are not typically access to the ballot box either. Are all nations with jails non-democratic? If so, there are precious few democracies on earth. Is the tyranny of the majority incompatible with democracy? My point here is that Pinker is guilty of a circular argument. He arbitrarily defines democracies as non-democratic if they do things he does not like. Germany when Hitler took over was indeed a democracy. Hitler came to power completely under a democratic process. If Pinker does not much like what Hitler did after he was accorded power under a democratic process (no man of good will does) he must not deny the democracy of Nazi Germany. He is logically obliged to acquiesce in the notion that sometimes the ballot box vote leads to bad things. Similarly, the U.S. was a democracy before 1865. Slavery existed before 1865. Therefore democracy is compatible with yet another evil, slavery. QED. Or would Pinker deny that slavery existed in the U.S. before 1865? Or that the U.S. was not a democracy before then?

⁶⁰ <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/01/ron-paul-addresses-boos-from-south-carolina-gop-debate/>

⁶¹ Krugman, 2011; Watson, 2011; but also see Jones, 2011; Murphy, 2011; Gordon, 2012; Catalan, 2010. To be fair to Krugman, he is not calling for actual war (although Krugman 2011 calls World War II “lovely.”) However, where was the anti-war left during the Obama war years? Nowhere, that is where.

⁶² Famous bank robber Willie Sutton was once asked why he robs (makes war on) banks. His reply: “That's where they keep the money.” Sutton in this instance proves himself to be a better economist than Pinker.

Pinker (281) does adopt the moderate position that democracies go to war with each other “less often” than others. However, he also buys into (283) a biased view of democracy which is “based on how competitive its political process is.” But a polity is as much a democracy as any other despite how “competitive” it is. In Alberta, Canada, from 1935 to 1982, the ruling right wing party’s share of the votes (first Social Credit and then the Progressive Conservatives) approached levels only seen in such “democracies” as the USSR and Egypt, under Mubarak.⁶³ Does this mean that democracy did not function in this province, since the vote totals were not “competitive”? Not a bit of it. Also, it is entirely irrelevant “how many constraints are placed upon the leader’s power” (283). As long as these powers, whatever they are, emanate from the democratic process (e.g., voting), that is immaterial. These powers are democratic, no matter for what evil purposes they are used.

Pinker’s (289) treatment of world government is highly unsatisfactory. He does a good workmanlike job in rejecting this institutional arrangement: “a world government would have no alternatives from which it could learn better governance, or to which its disgruntled citizens could emigrate, and hence it would have no natural checks against stagnation and arrogance.” Pinker rejects the necessity, from his point of view, of supporting world government. But he contradicts himself with his support of the “international Leviathan (fn. 55, supra).” If this is not a precursor to world government, then nothing is. Pinker fails to realize that he is *logically compelled* to promote world government, based upon his rejection of anarchism. For if this international institution can become “stagnant

and arrogant” due to the fact that no one can vote with his feet against it (emigrate), it also applies, albeit to a lesser degree, to a large national state. It applies, too, to a smaller one, unless, of course, secession is allowed. The states of the U.S. fought a war over this issue in the mid-19th century;⁶⁴ the right of secession lost. Nor would a victory of the south have been sufficient. Nothing less than secession down not to the state, county, city, borough, neighborhood level would suffice. No, what is required is secession down to the individual level, if the lack of emigration problem is to be fully addressed.

Let us approach this issue from the other direction. It is said that individuals A and B (or state, county, city, borough, neighborhood) A and B will be at each other’s throats unless there is a sovereign above them, to impose peace on them. But *precisely* the same relationship applies to nations. Without world government, there is a state of anarchy between Belgium and Botswana, between Chile and Canada, between Denmark and Dubai, between Argentina and Algeria. Etc. the *only* way to end this chaos, this Hobbesian war of all against all, is to impose, you guessed it, world government. Let me put this in algebraic format, so that there can be no mistake about this:

$$\frac{\text{National Government}}{\text{Individuals}} = \frac{\text{World Government}}{\text{National Governments}}$$

Verbally, this means that national government is to individuals as is world government to national governments. QED.

The choice before us is twofold: anarchy or world government. Pinker has rejected the former on numerous occasions. He must then accept the latter, whether he likes it or not. But is this line of reasoning not “barking mad?”⁶⁵ After all, do we not now have some 190 nations on the face of

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Alberta_general_elections; this is also true, albeit to a lesser extent, in the U.S. As of January 2013, there will be one party control of the legislatures of 46 states; and further, “Half of all state legislatures will have one-party control strong enough to override their governor’s veto.” Source: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2012/12/13/states-supermajority-legislatures/1758567/>. Still, the U.S. is a democracy, it that word is to have any coherent meaning at all.

64 For the view that this war was fought over secession, not slavery, see DiLorenzo (2002, 2006); for the general case in favor of secession, see Adams, 2000; Block, 2002A, 2002B, 2002C, 2007A; Denson, 1997; DiLorenzo, 2002, 2006; Gordon, 1998; Hulsmann, 2003; Hummel, 1996; Kreptul, 2003; McGee, 1994A, 1994B; Rosenberg, 1972; Rothbard, 1967; Stromberg, 1979; Thies, 2009; Thornton, 1994; Thornton and Ekelund, 2004.

65 I confess, I like that term

the earth, which is neither anarchy nor world government? No, we do not. Or, rather, yes we do, but without world government, this is *anarchy* between all these countries. If anarchy is as terrible as Pinker warns us ("chaos," "barbarism") how can we tolerate any such situation? It might be argued that this present state of affairs is not that awful at all. After all, the long peace since World War II has radically reduced the danger threatened by this situation of anarchy between nations. If so, then how can Pinker argue with a straight face that we need national governments? If the forces of our better natures are so powerful as to keep nations from butchering each other, why does this not also apply to *intra* national relations? If we do not any more need a world government to keep international peace, by the same logic we no longer require national governments to do so within each country. Pinker seeks to have it both ways. The laws of logic will not allow him to do so.

However, it cannot be said that Pinker does not have a not unreasonable response to this criticism. He writes (299-300, footnotes omitted):

"(The most reliable) datasets tally direct or *battle-related deaths* – the people who are shot, stabbed, clubbed, gassed, blown up, drowned, or deliberately starve as part of a contest in which the perpetrators themselves have to worry about getting hurt. The victims may be soldiers, or they may be civilians who were caught in the crossfire or killed in "collateral damage." The battle-related death statistics exclude *indirect deaths* arising from disease, starvation, stress, and the breaking down of infrastructure. When indirect deaths are added to direct deaths to yield the entire toll attributable to the war, the sum may be called *excess deaths*.

"Why do the datasets exclude indirect deaths? It's not to write these kinds of suffering out of the history books, but because direct deaths are the only ones that can be counted with confidence. Direct deaths also conform to our basic intuition of what it means for an agent to be responsible for an effect that it causes, namely that the agent foresees the effect, intends for it to happen, and makes it happen via a chain of events that does not have too

many uncontrollable intervening links." The problem with estimating indirect deaths is that it requires us to undertake the philosophical exercise of simulating in our imagination the possible world in which the war didn't occur and estimating the number of deaths that took place in that world, which then is used as a baseline. And that requires something close to omniscience. Would a postwar famine have taken place even if the war had not broken out because of the ineptitude of the overthrown government? What if there was a drought that year – should the famine deaths be blamed on the war or on the weather? If the rate of death from hunger was going down in the years before a war, should we assume that it would have declined even further if the war hadn't occurred, or should we freeze it at its level in the last year before the war? If Saddam Hussein had not been deposed, would he have gone on to kill more political enemies than the number of people who died in the intercommunal violence following his defeat? Should we add the 40 to 50 million victims of the 1918 influenza pandemic to the 15 million who were killed in World War I, because the flu virus would not have evolved its virulence if the war hadn't packed so many troops into trenches?¹⁹ Estimating indirect deaths requires answering these sorts of questions in a consistent way for hundreds of conflicts, an impossible undertaking."

Yes, it cannot be denied that these contrary to fact conditionals (if private enterprise ran the roads, x lives would be thereby saved) are "an impossible undertaking" to pin down *exactly*. By definition, there can be no such thing as contrary to fact conditional statistic. But this gives Pinker no warrant, no warrant whatsoever, to ignore this phenomenon entirely, as he does. If he were a bit more modest, he would have at least mentioned these many other ways in which governments kill innocent people. There is no doubt that Pinker is wise to confine his statistics to direct deaths rather than focus on excess deaths (direct plus indirect ones) at least as a first approximation. But matters are not so dire statistically speaking regarding "an individual's risk of dying" (300), due to the FDA, highways, socialized medicine, drug war, prohibition of markets in used body parts.

There is no excuse at all for Pinker to consign to the memory hole the work of Peltzman (1973, 1974, 1987A, 1987B, 2005), who does offer specific data on deaths caused by the state in these ways. To ignore these, as does our Harvard psychologist, is to underestimate the harmful effects of his favorite institution. Better to at least keep them in mind, if nothing else, even if in no other way than as contrary to fact conditionals, than to completely lose sight of them.

The best explanation for our author's ignoring these phenomena is either oversight or outright bias, or both. If the latter I am unsure as to which predominates. On the one hand he is voracious in his coverage of data. That hints of bias. On the other hand, he is almost totally ignorant of the libertarian literature, which bespeaks oversight. In any case, he must not be allowed to hide behind the excuse of "an impossible undertaking." Yes, this does indeed apply to the "100s of conflicts" he mentions, but not to people dying before their time due to unwise government prohibitions of free enterprise.

Our author writes in this regard (320) "... there is a moral imperative in getting the facts right, and not just to maintain credibility." Further, he doubles down on this sentiment (321, footnotes omitted):

"Genocide also shocks the imagination by the sheer number of its victims. Rummel, who was among the first historians to try to count them all, famously estimated that during the 20th century 169 million people were killed by their governments. The number is, to be sure, a highball estimate, but most atrocitologists agree that in the 20th century more people were killed by democides than by wars. Matthew White, in a comprehensive overview of the published estimates, reckons that 81 million people were killed by democide and another 40 million by man-made famines (mostly by Stalin and Mao), for a total of 121 million. Wars, in comparison, killed 37 million soldiers and 27 million civilians in battle, and another 18 million in the resulting famines, for a total of 82 million deaths. (White adds, though, that about half of the democide deaths took place during wars and may not have been possible without them.)"

Yes. But if there is a "moral imperative" to count famines, why, then, not, also, deaths due to socialized medicine, drug wars, centrally planned highways, etc?

Pinker (317) appreciates the deleterious effects of foreign welfare (foreign aid). He acknowledges that it "can be another poisoned chalice." But domestic welfare, too, can ruin lives (Murray, 1984).

Pinker (328) launches into an unjustified attack on "Utopian ideologies (who) invite genocide for two reasons. One is that they set up a pernicious utilitarian calculus. In a utopia, everyone is happy forever, so its moral value is infinite. Most of us agree that it is ethically permissible to divert a runaway trolley that threatens to kill five people onto a side track where it would kill only one. But suppose it were a hundred million lives one could save by diverting the trolley, or a billion, or — projecting into the indefinite future — infinitely many. How many people would it be permissible to sacrifice to attain that infinite good? A few million can seem like a pretty good bargain."

He continues (329):

"The second genocidal hazard of a utopia is that it has to conform to a tidy blue print. In a utopia, everything is there for a reason. What about the people? Well, groups of people are diverse. Some of them stubbornly, perhaps essentially, cling to values that are out of place in a perfect world. They may be entrepreneurial in a world that works by communal sharing, or bookish in a world that works by labor, or brash in a world that works by piety, or clannish in a world that works by unity, or urban and commercial in a world that has returned to its roots in nature. If you are designing the perfect society on a clean sheet of paper, why not write these eyesores out of the plans from the start?"

But libertarianism too is an ideology. It is based on the NAP and property rights which stem from homesteading⁶⁶ and legitimate title transfer (Nozick, 1974). It is utopian in the sense that

⁶⁶ Block, 1990, 2002D, 2002E; Block and Edelstein, 2012; Block and Yeatts, 1999-2000; Block vs Epstein, 2005; Bylund, 2005, 2012; Hoppe, 1993, 2011; Kinsella, 2003, 2006; Locke, 1948; Paul, 1987; Rothbard, 1973, 32; Rozeff, 2005

socio-biological considerations⁶⁷ make it unlikely we shall ever attain any such a state of affairs. It is unlikely, with human beings as we know them, to ever entirely end the scourge of murder, rape, theft, etc. But it is a worthwhile utopian ideology for all that: *if* it could but be attained, it would be marvelous. Nor is it vulnerable to the “utilitarian calculus” of which our author quite properly warns us. This libertarian philosophy of Rothbard’s (1973, 1982) does not allow for the murder of *anyone* let alone “a few millions.”⁶⁸ Nor is libertarian utopianism subject to the objection that (331) “finally, there are the job requirements. Would you want the stress and responsibility of running a perfect world? Utopian leadership selects for monumental narcissism and ruthlessness.” It is not at all “ruthless”⁶⁹ to insist that we all keep our mitts off the person and property of others.⁷⁰ It is indeed true of libertarians that (331): “Its leaders are possessed of a certainty about the rectitude of their cause and an impatience for incremental reforms.” But as long as they strictly adhere to the tenets of this

philosophy there is little danger of any untoward results. Mao, Stalin and Hitler were ideological utopians from whom the world suffered greatly. This does not at all apply to libertarians such as Murray Rothbard, Ron Paul or William Lloyd Garrison.⁷¹

Pinker is enough of a libertarian himself (329) to defend middlemen, money lenders, but he is a poor enough economist to think that trade is rooted in the transfer of “equivalent value.” If that is what a person receives in trade, barter, purchase, sale, any other commercial interaction, why would he bestir himself to do so, for no net gain? Obviously, all economic actors expect that their situation will be *improved* not remain the same.

Our author is not unaware of a strain of thought to which libertarians subscribe (336, footnotes omitted):

“Partly because the phrase ‘death by government’ figured in Rummel’s definition of democide and in the title of his book, his conclusion that almost 170 million people were killed by their governments during the 20th century has become a popular meme among anarchists and radical libertarians. But for several reasons, ‘governments are the main cause of preventable deaths’ is not the correct lesson to draw from Rummel’s data. For one thing, his definition of ‘government’ is loose,

⁶⁷ Axelrod, 1984; Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981; Baillargeon, 1986; Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby, 1992; Baron-Cohen, 1995; Boyd, 1988; Buss, 1994, 1995; Cheng, Holyoak, Nisbett & Oliver, 1986; Cosmides, 1985, 1989; Cosmides & Tooby, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1997; Daly and Wilson, 1988; Dawkins, 1976, 1986, 1995; Fiddick, Cosmides & Tooby, 1995; Fodor, 1983; Frank, 1988; Garcia, 1990; Gigerenzer & Hug, 1992; Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994; Johnson & Morton, J. 1991; Leslie, 1988, 1994; Maljkovic, 1987; Manktelow, & Evans, 1979; Markman, 1989; Mineka and Cook 1988; Moir and Jessel. 1989; Ohman, Dimberg and Ost, 1985; Pinker, 1994, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2011; Platt and Griggs, 1993; Ridley, 1986, 1993; Smith, 1976, 1978, 1988; Spelke, 1990; Sugiyama, Tooby & Cosmides, 1995; Symons, 1979, 1987, 1990, 1992; Tooby and Cosmides, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1992; Trivers, R. 1971, 1972, 1985; Wason, P. 1966, 1983; Wason and Johnson-Laird, 1972; Williams, 1966; Wilson, 1975; Wright, 1994A, 1994B

⁶⁸ Libertarianism is at its root a theory of punishment for crime. It may be “ethically permissible to divert a runaway trolley” so that it kills one person instead of five, but anyone who did so would be guilty of murder in this view. So much for Pinker’s utilitarian calculations.

⁶⁹ Hayek (1944, ch. 10) explains why the “worst get on top.”

⁷⁰ Unless we obtain their permission.

⁷¹ Here is a quote from a libertarian utopian ideologue (Garrison, 1831), one who is “possessed of a certainty about the rectitude of (his) cause and an impatience for incremental reforms,” one with whom, presumably, Pinker would strongly disagree: “I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or to speak, or write, with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; – but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest – I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD. The apathy of the people is enough to make every statue leap from its pedestal, and to hasten the resurrection of the dead.”

embracing militias, paramilitaries, and warlords, all of which could reasonably be seen as a sign of too little government rather than too much. White examined Rummel's raw data and calculated that the median democide toll by the twenty-four pseudo-governments on his list was around 100,000, whereas the median death toll caused by recognized governments of sovereign states was 33,000. So one could, with more justification, conclude that governments, on average cause three times *fewer* deaths than alternatives to government. Also, most governments in recent periods do not commit democides at all, and they prevent a far greater number of deaths than the democidal ones cause, by promoting vaccination, sanitation, traffic safety, and policing.

I have two problems with this very important passage. First, Pinker is playing fast and loose with the concept of "government." As we have established, the prefix "an" in front of "archy," or "anarchy" implies opposition to unjust rule. So the "militias, paramilitary and warlords" mentioned therein, and also the Blood, the Crips and the Mafia and any other tinhorn gangster, rapist or murderer, strictly speaking, are *also* governments. This holds insofar as any of these worthies engage in initiatory aggression against innocent people, just as do Pinker's "legitimate" governments. What Pinker really means by his distinction is not government versus non-government, but democratic government in contrast to all other political schemes. If so, let him say so, and stop bashing libertarian anarchism, or anarcho-capitalism. Democratic governments may have "cause(d) three times fewer deaths than non-democratic governments," but those are not by any means the only alternatives. Our author conveniently ignores free market anarchist institutions (Benson, 1990; Clay, 1997; Davies, 2002; Friedman, 1979, 2006; Leeson, 2007; Long, 1994; Peden, 1977; Powell, Ford, Nowrasteh, 2008; Stringham, 2003; Solvason, T. 1992; Thompson, 2006). Second, I have several times criticized Pinker on the ground that he avoids domestic government caused deaths due to drug laws, socialistic highways, medical care, etc. Until the above quoted passage from his book Pinker had a

plausible refutation of this claim of mine: he was only discussing deaths due to outright explicit murder (shooting, bombing, etc.). But here he has had the audacity to mention "traffic safety" and "policing." That possible refutation of his, then, is no longer open to him. He must now be forced to acknowledge government (democratic government) depredations in these and other such related fields, and can no longer hide behind, only, explicit government deaths due to shooting, bombing, torture, imprisonment.

We then read (337): "... the power of a democratic government is restricted by a tangle of institutional restraints, so a leader can't just mobilize armies and militias on a whim to fan out over the country and start killing massive numbers of citizens."

This may well have been true at least in the U.S. until World War II, at which time it was exceedingly rare for this nation to engage in imperialist wars without congressional approval. But since that time, the "leader," the president, most certainly *can* "mobilize armies and militias on a whim to fan out over the country and start killing massive numbers of citizens." Ron and Rand Paul have called for a return to this U.S. constitutional practice, but as of the time of this writing they have been spurned. Has Pinker been Rip Van Winkling it since 1941?⁷²

It is more than passing curious that Pinker (345) should admit that "Every year more than 40,000 Americans are killed in traffic accidents..." It is surprising that a facile mind such as his should not even think of this as a difficulty for his thesis. Any atrocitologist worthy of his salt would be brought up short by this horrendous figure. Pinker's otherwise excellent accomplishments in this arena are marred by this oversight. He continues down this erroneous path (346) by mentioning "measures that demonstrably save lives, such as enforcing lower highway speeds..." This is indeed possible. However, matters are a bit more complicated. If the maximum speed on

⁷² In Pinker's defense, these remarks are written on the understanding that "citizens" includes foreigners. If not, then the only explicit mass killing of U.S. citizens has been at the Waco massacre, where about 200 Branch Davidians were murdered. But this ignores the other usual suspects, highway fatalities, drug laws, etc.

the nation's highways was reduced to, say, 15 miles per hour, presumably, very few people, maybe none at all, would die of motor vehicle accidents. But thousands would perish as a result of the ensuing grinding to practically zero of transportation. What about 55 miles per hour? The double nickel was actually tried, not so much to save lives as to reduce oil consumption. Highway fatalities did indeed decrease. But what of the rise in deaths due to this emasculation of transportation? This is the "unseen" of Hazlitt (2008) and Bastiat (1845). The point is, without a competitive private enterprise highway industry (Block, 2009), we will never know whether this reduction in speed was worthwhile or not.⁷³ Perhaps it is not the average speed that kills, but rather the very significant variance in this variable that is responsible.

Pinker (382) supports the so called Civil Rights act of 1964. It cannot be denied that large parts of this legislation were entirely justified. But this law also weakened private property rights, surely the bedrock of a civilized order. It compelled owners to open their premises and serve people against their will. Here, our author contradicts his earlier (329) support for middlemen; owners of lunch counters who could no longer legally pick and choose their customers play precisely this role: they are intermediaries between customers and farmers. Unhappily, our author seems unaware of this logical contradiction of his; otherwise, I suspect, he would have at least attempted to justify it. He does no such thing.

It would appear that Pinker (398) is not totally adverse to the libertarian philosophy of anarcho capitalism. He supports "... the principle of *autonomy*: that people have an absolute right to their bodies, which may not be treated as a common resource to be negotiated among other interested parties." However, we must take this with a grain of salt, a large one, in view of the fact that he explicitly rejects anarchism all throughout his book, equating it with terrorism, chaos, murder, etc. But this philosophy is the only one fully compatible with "the principle of *autonomy*." He (398) does correctly assert that "Our current moral understanding does not seek to balance

the interests of a woman not to be raped, the interests of the men who may wish to rape her, and interests of the husbands and fathers who want to monopolize her sexuality. In an upending of the traditional valuation, the woman's ownership of her body counts for everything and the interests of all other claimants count for nothing." But he seems unaware that there is a widely respected and very prestigious school of thought (the University of Chicago Law and Economics tradition of Coase, Posner and Demsetz) that would quarrel with this.⁷⁴

We are informed (404) that "We are all feminists now." Maybe, well, this applies to most of us. But there are still a few holdouts.⁷⁵ Pinker (407) decries "segregation by sex." Curves is a woman only gymnasium franchise. Presumably, the "progressive" philosophy welcomed by this author allows "segregation by sex" for one gender but not the other. However, upholding the rights of free association is also the province of a few hold-out men's-only golf clubs, thank goodness, although there is extensive gnashing of teeth on the part of feminists at this outrage.

Pinker (407) comes out against "segregation by sex". This, presumably, implies opposition to male only golf clubs. But I wonder what he would think of gay bars, that limit themselves to serving only homosexual *men*. To say nothing of women-only gyms, such as the Curves franchise. Then, too, amongst Orthodox Jews, there are separate sections of the synagogue for men and women. To be consistent, he would have to reject them as well.⁷⁶ But logical consistency is not his strong suit. Am I being unfair to Pinker? Should I interpret his support or condemnation of the various practices he addresses under this rubric, solely in terms of whether or not they enhance or reduce violence? This would be a good defense of his analysis. Unfortunately, he never specifically limits the coverage of his commentary in this way. He speaks, instead, universally, as if

⁷³ We would be in the same position as the central planners of the USSR.

⁷⁴ Were Pinker but aware of this literature, I am sure he would join me in this critique: Block (1996A).

⁷⁵ Block, 2012A; Goldberg, 1973; Levin, 1984, 1987; McElroy, 1991; Mercer, 2003, 2005, 2006; Sommers, 1994; Taylor, 1992.

⁷⁶ That is, call for laws prohibiting them.

these institutions such as sexual segregation are to be rejected per se.

I cannot let pass Pinker's remark (415) about "the exploitation of children to clean chimneys and crawl through tunnels in coal mines." This is a Dickensian attack on the industrial revolution. To what is our author comparing this "exploitation?" To forced child prostitution in the modern era? To that plus, often, death in the 17th century? This is part and parcel of his lack of appreciation for the role of the industrial revolution in moving us in the direction of modern standards of living. We learn (417) that "The fateful tipping point between keeping and sacrificing a newborn is set both by internal emotions and by cultural norms. In a culture such as ours that reveres birth and takes every step to allow babies to thrive, we tend to think that joyful bonding between mother and newborn is close to reflexive."

No. The tipping point is far more likely to be increasing wealth, which enabled improvements in medical technology, more food for babies, less need for the triage on the basis of which babies were killed in earlier epochs. And a big boost to this happy state of affairs was the free market philosophy which allowed the industrial revolution to take place. Pinker (422-426) offers three other explanations: infanticide was criminalized, it became a taboo, and it was "a gift of affluence." And from whence did this affluence spring? From the economic system so denigrated by Pinker and his intellectual forebear, Dickens.

Our author deals with an objection to his Panglossian thesis (426): "According to an alternative history, the major long-term trend in the West is that people have switched from killing children shortly after they are born to killing them shortly after they are conceived." Pinker (427) rejects this on the ground that

"Modern sensibilities have increasingly conceived moral worth in terms of *consciousness*, particularly the ability to suffer and flourish, and have identified consciousness with the activity of the brain... The vast majority of abortions are carried out well before the milestone of having a functioning brain, and thus are safely conceptualized, according to this understanding of the worth of human life, as fundamentally

different from infanticide and other forms of violence."

But this rationalization will not do. Sleeping persons, unconscious people, do not have "functioning brains" either.⁷⁷ We would hardly contemplate killing them for this reason. Both of course, have this *potential*. But the same can be said for the fetus, even as a mere fertilized egg, the earliest stage of development.⁷⁸

Our author is a bit more sensible on the industrial revolution when he writes (433):

"Though the Industrial Revolution originally moved children from backbreaking labor on farms to backbreaking labor in mills and factories, legal reforms increasingly restricted child labor. At the same time, the affluence that flowed from the maturing Industrial Revolution drove rates of infant mortality downward, reduced the need for child labor, and provided a tax stream that could support social services. More children went to school, which soon became compulsory and free."

However, this is not really good enough. People "voted with their feet" from farm to mill. We are entitled to deduce from this fact alone, *ceteris paribus*, that this constituted an *improvement* not merely a sideways movement from one kind of "backbreaking labor" to another. "Legal reforms" did not at all "restrict ... child labor." Rather, 'twas the increasing *wealth* emanating from the industrial revolution that enabled this, although, certainly, legislation tried to *take credit* for this beneficial course of events. A simple mental experiment ought to convince anyone of this. If the law went too fast in legally limiting child labor, went ahead of the reduction that could be justified on the basis of increasing productivity, then children would have *died*, and only would

⁷⁷ That is, there is no consciousness there. The brains are "functioning" in the sense of "telling" the organs of the body what to do, but machines can enable comatose people to do that as well, and their brain function is certainly compromised.

⁷⁸ For the libertarian theory of abortion, which does not fit into either category of "pro-life and pro-choice" (428), the only options Pinker appears to recognize, see Block, 1977, 1978, 2001, 2004, Block and Whitehead, 2005

have been released from onerous work in that manner.⁷⁹

Pinker's views on spanking children are also problematic. He (435) writes: "But perhaps the most compelling reason to avoid spanking is symbolic... Spanking contradicts the ideal of nonviolence⁸⁰ in the family and society." But this author appears to support (431, 435) the practice of "time-outs." However, a "time-out" is equivalent to kidnapping, surely a violent offense. Suppose I were to give Pinker a time out for writing this in many ways brilliant, but also execrable book. I would then have to force, compel, him to stop whatever he would otherwise be doing, and instead go stand in the corner or some such place. When one adult treats another in this way surely it is incompatible with the "nonviolence" Pinker supports. And suppose the child refuses to take a time out. Is it a NAP violation to twist his arm to make him do so? The point is, if children are to be treated as adults, then *no* compulsion may properly be used against them. This will strike anyone who has ever brought up children as highly problematic.

We learn (437) that "Children are people and like adults they have a right to life and limb (and genitalia) that is secured by the social contract that empowers the state. The fact that other individuals – their parents – stake a claim of ownership over them cannot negate that right." There are problems here. In the libertarian

society, children cannot be "owned." All that can be the subject to a "claim of ownership" is the right to be the guardian of the child. This is earned by giving birth to the child, or claiming it through a surrogacy contract. It can be maintained by guarding the child, taking care of it, etc.⁸¹ And, sometimes, rarely, this can best be accomplished with a loving spanking.⁸² Our author does not seem to realize that children are *different* than adults. They are uncivilized. Although, given man's inhumanity to man, I may well be overstating matters here. Our author (441) seems to be cognizant of this fact: "Bullying has probably been around for as long as children have been around, because children like many juvenile primates, strive for dominance in their social circle by demonstrating their mettle and strength."⁸³ Perhaps bullies should be spanked, to show them how it feels to be on the receiving end of violence? Pinker does not say.

Second, from whence arises this "social contract?" Does Pinker, who presumably lives and dies by empirical evidence, have anything of the sort to supply in support of the existence of this "social contract?" Of course not. It is a total fabrication. He makes these things up as he goes along. I don't remember signing any such document. And without it, everything the government does, everything, constitutes the very violence that Pinker is so intent upon demonstrating the reduction thereof.⁸⁴

We read an interesting passage here (465, footnote deleted):

"For Singer, these analogies are far more than rhetorical techniques. In another book, *The*

⁷⁹ Much the same phenomenon occurred with regard to hours legislation. Reduce it by too much, more than increasing productivity would allow, and, again, needless deaths are the result. The law *followed* the reduction in hours of work; it did not lead it. If we could by a magical stroke of the legislative pen accomplish these tasks, why has not the law prohibited people from working more than, oh, 5 hours a week? Why have our politicians been so niggardly with regard to child labor? Why do they not prohibit labor from anyone aged less than 35 (55) years? Now, *that* would be generous. From where I stand, I am 71 years old, 35 and even 55 year olds are mere children. Surely, the government should come to their rescue.

⁸⁰ Nonviolence is not an ideal in the free society. Boxing is violent. Football is violent. Video games are violent. Movies are violent. Even novels depict violence. The act that should be prohibited is not "violence", but rather *initiatory* violence. Namely, the NAP should be respected; e.g., libertarianism.

⁸¹ When Terri Schaivo's husband (Block, 2011D) wanted to pull the plug on her, he was no longer guarding her life. This guardianship having come to an end, his control over her fate should have been immediately taken from him.

⁸² For an elaboration of the libertarian perspective on children's rights, see Block, 1976, 2003A, 2004B, 2011D; Block and Fleischer, 2010; Evers, 1978A, 1978B; Feser, 2004; Rothbard, 1982B, chapter 14.

⁸³ The movie "Lord of the Flies" seems to be an apt illustration of this phenomenon.

⁸⁴ See this material for a stern rebuke of the "social contract" fallacy: DeJasay, 1989; Evers, 1977; Machan, 1983; Outlaw, 2008; Spooner, 1870, which, of course, Pinker does not condescend to address.

Expanding Circle, he advanced a theory of moral progress in which human beings were endowed by natural selection with a kernel of empathy toward kin and allies, and have gradually extended it to wider and wider circles of living things, from family and village to clan, tribe, nation, species, and all of sentient life.²⁷⁴ The book you are reading owes much to this insight.”

This however is undercut by the statolatry which permeates “the book (I am) reading.” Pinker opposes spanking children. But the government “spansks” its residents through taxation, regulation, inflation, public ownership, etc.⁸⁵ Even purely democratic governments foist the “tyranny of the majority” on those subject to its rule. If our Harvard professor is so interested in “expanding” or “extending” rights, why does he not do so for the long-suffering denizens of modern states? Even assuming, arguendo he is correct in his claim that they are an improvement over what went on before, he could still acknowledge their murderousness and leave off defending them via entirely fabricated “social contracts” which relieve these institutions of the charges against them. If we have agreed to be governed by them, due to this “social contract,” we cannot in good conscience object to their depredations. In like manner, the professional boxer who is punched (above the belt) cannot complain of assault and battery.

In Pinker’s view (477): “The hidden hand of an information economy may have made institutions more receptive to women, minorities, and gays, but it still took government muscle in the form of antidiscrimination laws to integrate them fully.”⁸⁶

Does he favor compulsory bisexuality? It is politically correct to say that male heterosexuals are discriminatory and prejudicial⁸⁷: they exclude

half the human race as potential love – bed partners. But female heterosexuals are guilty of the same identical crime; they, too, exclude half the human race as potential love – bed partners. It is not politically correct to assert this, but I will say it anyway,⁸⁸ homosexuals, both male and female, are also discriminatory and prejudicial; they, too, exclude half the human race as potential love – bed partners. It is only bisexuals who are free of this egregious behavior. But wait: even these saints discriminate on the basis of beauty (lookism), sense of humor (laughism), intelligence (IQism), age (ageism), odor (olfactoryism), and hundreds of other criteria.⁸⁹ Curious minds want to know: does Pinker himself, forsooth, engage in any of these “poisonous beliefs”?

Females, minorities ... are still not “fully integrated.” Presumably, this means they are not paid equally. This is because compensation in the free market is based on productivity, and these groups do not boast of this characteristic as much as white males.⁹⁰ I expect that belief in this true explanation is also “poisonous.”

Our author blatantly contradicts himself, once again, when he (479) both supports Martin Luther King’s referral to a “taboo on violence,” but also notes that his civil “rights” movement made “a nuisance of itself with sit-ins, strikes.” But what does Pinker think that sit-ins and strikes *are*, if not violent violations of property rights? They constitute trespass! Initiatory aggression. It is more than passing curious that the writer of a book on violence fails utterly to recognize these acts as such. Suppose I were to engage in a “sit-in” in Pinker’s living room, and refused to vacate his premises when he asked me to do so. Posit that I organize a “strike” at chez Pinker. I and my colleagues surround his house and refuse to allow him and his family, and delivery-men too, to ingress or egress. Would Pinker consider this a violent violation of his rights? Would he even consider it violent? If not, he has a strange understanding of this concept. But this is *precisely* what Martin Luther King and his

⁸⁵ At least the spanked child, presumably, assuming no child abuse, did something wrong, on the basis of which he is penalized in this manner. In sharp contrast, the victims of statism are innocent of any crime, and are “spanked” regardless.

⁸⁶ On p. 389 he defends affirmative action, opposes discrimination.

⁸⁷ It is politically correct to criticize male heterosexuals for just about anything, so uncivilized we have become, from allowing feminism and “progressives” into the intellectual and moral parlor.

⁸⁸ It is not politically correct to criticize homosexuals of either gender for anything.

⁸⁹ Don’t get me started.

⁹⁰ Lukas, 2011.

minions did. Pinker and the “civil rights” movement may not consider it violent but the owners of the lunch counters surely did, as would Pinker, too, if this occurred in his living room or around his house. If Pinker tossed me out of his domicile on my rear end it would be *me* who was the violent one, and not him. Yes, this is no great stakes compared to the lethal violence employed all too often on our planet. But violence is violence is violence, and in a book dedicated to charting this phenomenon it is not too much to ask that the scholar studying it be clear on what it means, when it takes place and to cease and desist from *supporting* it, as in this case.

Let us further probe our Harvard professor's understanding of violence, a core concept of his book. In the view of Pinker (510): “Psychopaths ... perpetrate nonviolent crimes like bilking elderly couples out of their life savings⁹¹ and running a business with ruthless disregard for the welfare of the workforce or stakeholders.⁹²” It cannot be denied that fraud is a non-violent crime. But what about maximizing profit? If the latter consists of buying low and selling high, or price gouging, of monopolizing, engaging in cutthroat competition, it is not violent, and not a crime. On the other hand if the employer is cheating employees out of their salary, paying them less than the agreed upon wage, it is nonviolent, but is as much of a crime as any other instance of fraud. But if the firm pollutes,⁹³ it constitutes a violent criminal act under libertarian law, in much the same way as do sit-ins or strikes.⁹⁴

Pinker appears to be on the side of our devils, not our angels, in his support of the market failure doctrine of public goods. He (522) avers:

“Our fitness depends not just on our own fortunes but on the fortunes of the bands, villages, and tribes we find ourselves in, which are bound together by real or fictive kinship, networks of reciprocity, and a commitment to public goods, including group defense. Within the group, some people help to police the provision of public goods by punishing any parasite who doesn't contribute a fair share, and they are rewarded by the group's esteem.”

But does not calling someone a “parasite” constitute a “hate crime” against which our author inveighs? Here is a man, call him Joe, minding his own business, a pacifist. He sees no danger, no need for any “group defense.” His principles forbid him to contribute to any such project in any case. He is deemed a “parasite” and “punished,” while the likes of Pinker stand on the sidelines, applauding. This is our better nature?⁹⁵

Pinker (523, footnote deleted) offers the following for our consideration:

“...people, to varying degrees, harbor a motive they call social dominance, though a more intuitive term is tribalism: the desire that social groups be organized into a hierarchy, generally with one's own group dominant over the others. A social dominance orientation, they show, inclines people to a sweeping array of opinions and values, including patriotism, racism, fate, karma, caste, national destiny, militarism, toughness on crime, and defensiveness of existing arrangements of authority and inequality. An orientation away from social dominance, in contrast, inclines people to humanism, socialism, feminism, universal rights, political progressivism, and the egalitarian and pacifist themes in the Christian Bible.”

I note that while he does not include capitalism in the former bad category, “inequality,” one of the

⁹¹ Does he mean social security? Surely not. Yet, the appellation fits. Ferrara, 1982, 1985; Gruber and Wise, 1999; Juurikkala, 2007a, 2007b; MacKenzie, 2007; Murphy, 2005B; Reisman, 2005; Rockwell, 2004; Rothbard, 1990; Rounds, 2005; Sennholz, 2004; Steinreich, 1996.

⁹² For the view that so-called “stakeholders” have no rights at all, see Block, 1993, 2000; Klein, 2001; Marcoux, 2002; O'Neill, 2008; Scott, 1998

⁹³ Trespasses dust particles onto other people's property (Rothbard, 1982A).

⁹⁴ A mass quit must be sharply distinguished from a strike (Block, 2010).

⁹⁵ For a critique of the public goods argument, see Barnett and Block, 2007, 2009; Block, 1983, 2003; Bibliography, undated; Cowen, 1988; De Jasay, 1989; Holcombe, 1997; Hoppe, 1989; Hummel, 1990; Osterfeld, 1989; Pasour, 1981; Rothbard, 1985, 1997; Schmidt, 1991; Sechrest, 2003, 2004A, 2004B, 2007; Tinsley, 1999.

attributes of this system does appear there.⁹⁶ And “socialism”⁹⁷ makes its way into the good file. Yet capitalism⁹⁸ has rarely been responsible for any deaths; the same cannot be said for socialism, on the other hand.⁹⁹ This is more than passing curious, coming from someone who favors our better angels.

Our author claims (524) that “in the arena of interstate relations” Canada (does not) make trouble. But this war-mongering nation stationed troops in Afghanistan, even though the latter never posed any threat to the former. Pinker (536) erroneously buys into the light-house-as-public-good market failure argument. He also misconstrues the tragedy of the commons as yet another market failure, when he says: “One can imagine ...¹⁰⁰ real-life examples.”

“One can imagine a group of fishermen chipping in for harbor improvements such as a lighthouse, or merchants in a block of stores pooling contributions for a security guard.) The best outcome for the group is for everyone to contribute the maximum amount. But, the best outcome for an *individual* is to stint on his own contribution and to be a free rider on the profits from everyone else's. The tragedy is that contributions will dwindle to zero and everyone ends up worse off. (The biologist Garrett Hardin proposed an identical scenario called the Tragedy of the Commons. Each farmer cannot resist grazing his own cow on the town commons, stripping it bare to everyone's loss. Pollution, overfishing, and carbon emissions are equivalent real-life examples.”

⁹⁶ Inequality rears its head in all real world examples of socialism, too. It is a human condition. For its defense, see Rothbard, 1971.

⁹⁷ We are now talking about coercive socialism, or state socialism, not the voluntary socialism that exists in the commune, the kibbutz, the monastery.

⁹⁸ Laissez faire, not crony

⁹⁹ Think Mao, Pol Pot, Hitler, Stalin, socialists all.

¹⁰⁰ Fishermen? I am shocked, shocked at this violent anti-feminist outburst. Surely, “fishers,” or “fisherpersons” would be better. But I'm not sure of the latter, given its violent last syllable. Perhaps “fisherdaughters?”

The reason for difficulties with overfishing¹⁰¹ and light-houses¹⁰² is that private property in the oceans is not allowed by law. Likewise, the tragedy of the commons arises not when people voluntarily own things in common, as in partnerships, but when they are *compelled* by law to do so, or are legally prohibited from dividing up the “commons.” Pollution, carbon emissions, etc., are a trespass, yet another violation of private property rights (Rothbard, 1982) and again not a market failure of the public goods variety. I do not deny that the overwhelming majority of economists would subscribe to Pinker's viewpoint on this matter. As a non economist, he can perhaps be forgiven for adopting their perspective. But a thorough researcher would not have contented himself with blindly following majority opinion. He would not have done anything like this in his own field of specialty. He should have at least mentioned, if not attempted to refute, alternative views, such as those mentioned in footnote 95, *supra*.

Opines Pinker (539): “... an embezzler who used his ill-gotten gains to support a lavish lifestyle would seem to deserve a harsher punishment than one who redirected them to the company's underpaid workers in the developing world.” This is yet another unwarranted attack on the free enterprise system in general, and on “sweat shops” in particular, indicative of economic illiteracy. Even Krugman (1997), as ignorant of the dismal science as any Keynesian, had this to say about that institution: “It is the indirect and unintended result of the actions of soulless multinationals and rapacious local entrepreneurs, whose only concern was to take advantage of the profit opportunities offered by cheap labor. It is not an edifying spectacle; but no matter how base the motives of those involved, the result has been to move hundreds of millions of people from abject poverty to something still awful but nonetheless significantly better.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Block, 1999C, 2011C; Cordato, 2004; Hardin, 1968; Rothbard, 1982A; Smith, 1981

¹⁰² Barnett and Block. 2007, 2009.

¹⁰³ For more defenses of sweat shops, see Block, 2008, 2011B; Greene, Henry, Nathanson and Block, 2007; Krugman, 1997, 2001; Myerson, 1997; Powell, 2006, 2008, undated; Powell and Skarbek, 2006;

Pinker (556) launches a blanket condemnation of "ideology":

"... it's ideology that drove many of the worst things that people have ever done to each other. They include the Crusades, the Euro-Russian and the Chinese civil wars, the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, and the genocides of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot. And ideology can be dangerous for several reasons. The infinite good it promises prevents its true believers from cutting a deal. It allows any number of eggs to be broken to make the utopian omelet. And it renders opponents of the ideology infinitely evil and hence deserving of infinite punishment."

But these are not *good* ideologies. For his part, our author certainly espouses a few of them all throughout his book: peace, civility, violence reduction, an "open society,"¹⁰⁴ etc. Further, if there can be "virulent ideologies," and certainly we have plenty of those, then there must be good ideologies, also. Thus, the blanket condemnation of "ideology" is unjustified. I hereby nominate anarcho-capitalism as a good ideology; it certainly allows for and indeed includes the "open society" where no one is (legally) punished for airing *any* viewpoint.¹⁰⁵ The suffix "ology" means, merely, the systematic *study* of something. For example, biology is the study of life. In like manner ideology would be the study of ideas, surely a neutral or even beneficial undertaking. Perhaps Pinker is confusing ideology and demagoguery?

Our author next buys into the "libertarian paternalism" fallacy foisted upon us by Sunstein

and Thaler (2003, 2007).¹⁰⁶ Does Pinker even mention, let alone attempt to refute, the utter evisceration these ideas have received from Austro libertarians such as Whitman and Rizzo (2003, 2007)? To ask this is to answer it. He follows this up with the view that "gun control laws" (607) reduce violence, while again ignoring evidence to the contrary.¹⁰⁷

Pinker (622) mentions "dangerous territory such as wars of conquest, the use of chemical and nuclear weapons, dehumanizing racial stereotypes, casual allusions to rape and the taking of identifiable human lives."

Notice any strange juxtapositions here? Surely, articulating "dehumanizing racial stereotypes," and offering "casual allusions to rape" do not deserve to be placed in the same sentence as "wars of conquest, the use of chemical and nuclear weapons, ... and the taking of identifiable human lives." As it happens, Pinker is himself guilty of utilizing "dehumanizing racial stereotypes." He (94) takes note of the fact that the black murder rate is much higher than that of whites:

"Louisiana's homicide rate is higher than those of the other southern states, and the District of Columbia (a barely visible black speck) is off the scale at 30.8, in the range of the most dangerous Central American and southern African countries. These jurisdictions are outliers mainly because they have a high proportion of African Americans. The current black-white difference in homicide rates within the United States is stark. Between

Powell and Zwolinski, 2012; Williams, 2004; Zwolinski, 2007

¹⁰⁴ He himself (569) writes: "Though nothing can guarantee that virulent ideologies will not infect a country, one vaccine is an open society in which people and ideas move freely and no one is punished for airing dissenting views, including those that seem heretical to polite consensus." But this "vaccine" is itself an ideology. George Jonas makes a similar error. For a refutation, see Block, 2013.

¹⁰⁵ People may be privately and non-violently "punished," and properly so, for saying just about anything. For example, I hereby condemn Nazism, Socialism and Communism, and will boycott advocates of these pernicious doctrines whenever possible (well, convenient).

¹⁰⁶ He claims (607) that "We authorize our employers to invest a part of every paycheck for our retirement." Evidently, Pinker thinks that this is a voluntary choice, not compelled by the social security laws, under threat of, of course, *violence*. Au contraire, we do not "authorize" any such thing. This results from paternalist compulsion. If we are so stupid, and have such high time preferences that we will not save for our old age, or for the proverbial "rainy day," how can we untermenschen be smart enough to be allowed to vote? And, if we mundanes are intelligent enough to be entrusted with access to the ballot, why does this not apply to our savings rates?

¹⁰⁷ Footnote 38, *supra*. Pinker does list Lott, one of the key theoreticians and statisticians of this issue in his reference section, but not on his specialty, gun control laws.

1976 and 2005 the average homicide rate for white Americans was 4.8, while the average rate for black Americans was 36.9. It's not just that blacks get arrested and convicted more often, which would suggest that the race gap might be an artifact of racial profiling. The same gap appears in anonymous surveys in which victims identify the race of their attackers, and in survey in which people of both races recount their own history of violent offences."

These are stereotypes, and would undoubtedly be considered "dehumanizing" by the politically correct. Pinker is to be congratulated for courageously mentioning these politically incorrect facts. They are merely empirical generalizations, inductions, as are *all* stereotypes. But he is not at all to be congratulated for contradictorily¹⁰⁸ rejecting the use of "dehumanizing racial stereotypes."

Pinker seems never to have heard of the concept "immoral." He writes (622): "The world has far too much morality. If you added up all the homicides committed in pursuit of self-help justice, the casualties of religious and revolutionary wars, the people executed for victimless crimes and misdemeanors, and the targets of ideological genocides they would surely outnumber the fatalities from amoral predation and conquest."

But why call this *morality*? Surely, it is *immoral* to do these things.

Our author engages in a common error regarding "harm." In his view (624-625): "The intuitions that we in the modern West tend to think of as the core of morality – fairness, justice, the protection of individuals, and the prevention of harm – are just one of several spheres of concern..." No. It is entirely licit to harm other people in a myriad of ways. If I open up a grocery right next door to the Pinker emporium, I have indubitably "harmed" him in some real sense, as I compete away from him half his customers. But I have every *right* to do just that. Pinker has himself "harmed" at least one scholar by taking on a professorship at Harvard, which would have gone to someone else had he not done so.

¹⁰⁸ The motto at Harvard must surely be: "logical consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds." Perhaps it is: "Do as I say, not as I do."

Pinker's anti market bias rises to the fore when he maintains that (630) "a good case against ... an open market for ... body organs ... (is) ... that the poor might sell their organs out of desperation." But if they were that desperate, it is necessarily so that what they can purchase with the proceeds of such a sale would be worth way more than the value they place on these body parts they are so anxious to supply. Suppose that the only way a man can save his child's life if by selling his kidney to a rich person in need of it. Pinker, presumably, would ban such a life-saving and life-affirming sale, even though the only way for him to do so would be to initiate *violence* against both the intended recipient and donor. Such prohibitions cause needless suffering and death, something we would expect Pinker's "better angel" not to countenance.

Either his worst angel has taken over his psyche at this point in his writing of the book, or, as I suspect, he heart is still in the right place, but an organ further up in his body is just not functioning on all cylinders. Nor is this likely only a typographical error on his part, for on the very next page (631) he supports the taboo opposed to "selling out ... an organ ... for barter or cash."¹⁰⁹ Further, Pinker notes (632-633): "... libertarians would allow people to negotiate virtually any resource under Market Pricing, including organs, babies,¹¹⁰ medical care,

¹⁰⁹ For the benefits of "selling out ... an organ" see footnote 18. Pinker also opposes "selling out ... oneself." For the case in favor of voluntary slavery, see Andersson, 2007; Block, 1969, 1999B, 2001, 2002, 2003C, 2004A, 2005, 2006, 2007A, 2007B; Nozick, 1974, pp. 58, 283, 331; Philmore, 1982; Steiner, 1994, pp. 232. Of course, it cannot be denied, a person might sell a kidney for a luxury automobile, or for something else that most of us would look upon as frivolous. But should not such a foolish decision be allowed by law? If people are so stupid as to agree to such deals, and they are, they are, then how can we allow them to vote? And, if we cannot do so, what happens to Pinker's favorite means of selecting governments, democracy?

¹¹⁰ Libertarians do not at all support the sale of babies. This would apply not to the babies themselves, which implies (non voluntary) slavery, but rather the right to bring up a baby, function as a guardian for it, which is quite a different matter. For more elaboration, see footnote 81, *supra*.

sexuality and education.” He does not, as per usual, condescend to instruct his readers as to why libertarians are mistaken in this view of theirs.

Pinker registers his disapproval of (635): “... the opening of foreign markets with gunboats.” I support him in this, but only provisionally. If it is government A that is doing this to government B, then our author is entirely in the right. States Rothbard (1963) of this type of act:

“All State wars, therefore, involve increased aggression against the State's own taxpayers, and almost all State wars (*all*, in modern warfare) involve the maximum aggression (murder) against the innocent civilians ruled by the enemy State. On the other hand, revolutions are generally financed voluntarily and may pinpoint their violence to the State rulers, and private conflicts may confine their violence to the actual criminals. The libertarian must, therefore, conclude that, while some revolutions and some private conflicts *may* be legitimate, State wars are *always* to be condemned.”

But suppose it is a private group that is attacking government B for not allowing free markets to operate in this manner. Do they have justice on their side? It is difficult to avoid this conclusion, since the initial closing of markets¹¹¹ was itself a prior initiatory act of violence. Libertarians are not pacifists. In countering such a depraved statist act of government B's, the forces of justice, whether they use “gun boats” or not, are clearly *defending* civilized values. They are promoting prosperity and in so doing are saving lives. Pinker might as well condemn a (hopefully private) policeman for stopping a mugger, a rapist or a murderer on the ground that this, too, constitutes violence. Pinker's pacifism appears to be a bit biased against economic liberty. Question for Pinker: suppose a “gun boat” was used to stop a rape; would you oppose this?

But wait. Pinker shifts gears once again and performs another 180 degree about face (636-637):

“The momentum of social norms in the direction of Market Pricing gives many people the willies, but it would, for better or worse, extrapolate the trend toward nonviolence. Radical libertarians, who love the Market Pricing model, would decriminalize prostitution, drug possession, and gambling, and thereby empty the world's prisons of millions of people currently kept there by force (to say nothing of sending pimps and drug lords the way of Prohibition gangsters). The progression toward personal freedom raises the question of whether it is morally *desirable* to trade a measure of socially sanctioned violence for a measure of behavior that many people deem intrinsically wrong, such as blasphemy, homosexuality, drug use, and prostitution. But that's just the point: right or wrong, retracting the moral sense from its traditional spheres of community, authority, and purity entails a reduction of violence. And that retraction is precisely the agenda of classical liberalism: a freedom of individuals from tribal and authoritarian force, and a tolerance of personal choices as long as they do not infringe on the autonomy and well-being of others.”

This is as good a ringing endorsement of anarcho-capitalism as any in the literature. Murray Rothbard himself doesn't say it much better than this.¹¹² Perhaps I was too harsh in upbraiding Pinker for lacking “foolish consistency.” I should vastly prefer that Pinker contradict himself when he says brilliant things like this, than that he be a consistent anti market statist.¹¹³

Whereupon Pinker (637) reverses field once again and delivers himself of this war-mongering statement, when he supports: “... the policy of responding to international provocations with economic sanctions and tactics of containment rather than retaliatory strikes.”

¹¹¹ Up to and including those for drugs, used body parts, guardianship of babies, any prohibition of what Nozick (1974) called “capitalist acts between consenting adults.” Hey, Nozick too was a Harvard professor.

¹¹² This is about the highest level of praise I am capable of giving.

¹¹³ It is fair to say, however, that Pinker is the Romney (weathervane) of political economy.

But sanctions kill innocent people, often more than the surgical strikes accomplished with drones.¹¹⁴ With regard to the atrocity of sanctions, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked if the U.S. sanctions against Iraq, which were responsible for killing some half a million children, were “worth it.” She replied in the affirmative.¹¹⁵ That is more innocents than many a “retaliatory strike.” What kind of “provocation” does our author have in mind? He does not say. But if this has anything to do with U.S. depredations abroad, it almost always concerns something that is, in the vernacular, none of the business of the U.S. government; e.g., Iraq (Paul, 2008).

Switching gears once again,¹¹⁶ this author once again delivers himself of a gem of a libertarian insight that deserves praise and widespread publicity (637): “We are all one big family, and no one within it may usurp the life or freedom of anyone else.” I am not so sure of the “family” business, but the rest of this is pure libertarianism. It is interesting that a statolatrist could make such a statement, when the government is a great usurper of “the life and freedom” of most people. However, he takes back with the other hand what he gives with this one (640): “Though American political liberalism is by no means the same as classical liberalism, the two overlap in their weighting of the moral spheres.” In my view, in sharp contrast, the players in political economy are like a three legged stool: there are libertarians (classical liberals), liberals (leftists, “progressives” as they call themselves nowadays – I see them as socialists, and not of the voluntary persuasion either) and conservatives (fascists, in my view). All three are equidistant from each other. The libertarian appreciates that conservatives join us in (very slightly) favoring more economic freedom than the liberal.¹¹⁷ The libertarian appreciates

that liberals join us in (very slightly) favoring more personal freedom than the conservatives.¹¹⁸ Both are horrid on foreign policy. Where was the supposed anti war left during Obama’s wars? Nowhere, that’s where. This attempt on Pinker’s part to conflate and confuse libertarianism with left liberalism must be resisted, in the interests of accuracy if nothing else.

However, Pinker reverses field once again and utters a pox on both your houses of a libertarian gem (642):

“It was the Harvard-educated best and the brightest who dragged America into the quagmire of Vietnam. ‘Critical theorists’ and postmodernists on the left, and defenders of religion on the right, agree on one thing: that the two world wars and the Holocaust were the poisoned fruit of the West’s cultivation of science and reason since the Enlightenment.”

Magnificent. It is hard to see how any libertarian could have better expressed our meme that left and right are irrational, immoral, and perhaps equally so.

Continuing in this libertarian vein, Pinker (647-648, footnote deleted) goes so far as to channel Hoppe’s (1993B, 1995) argumentation ethics:

“... in real life people can confer, and they can bind their promises with emotional, social, or legal guarantors. And as soon as one side tries to prevail on the other not to injure him, he has no choice but to commit himself not to injure the other side either. As soon as he says, ‘It’s bad for you to hurt me,’ he’s committed to ‘It’s bad for me to hurt you,’ since logic cannot tell the difference between ‘me’ and ‘you.’ Nor can reason distinguish between Mike and Dave, or Lisa and Amy, or any other set of individuals, because as far as logic is concerned, they’re just a bunch of x’s and y’s. So as soon as you try to persuade someone to avoid harming you by appealing to *reasons* why he shouldn’t, you’re sucked into a commitment to the avoidance of harm as a general goal. And to the extent that you pride yourself on the quality of your reason, work to apply it far and wide, and use it to

¹¹⁴ For Pinker’s pro drone sentiments, see text, *supra*, at footnote 7.

¹¹⁵ <http://www.fff.org/freedom/fd0401c.asp>;
<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1084>

¹¹⁶ Pinker would make a formidable broken field runner, if ever his interests turned to football.

¹¹⁷ However, a standard bearer of the right such as Romney favors the minimum wage law and defends the Fed.

¹¹⁸ The feminists, however, want to prohibit prostitution and pornography, and Obama’s views on drug legalization leave much to be desired.

persuade others, you will be forced to deploy that reason in pursuit of universal interests, including an avoidance of violence.”

Would that Pinker *consistently* follow through on this keen insight. Then, we would hear no more from him, any more than ever we do from Hoppe (2001A), about the benefits of statist democracy.¹¹⁹

In the next section of his book concerning the supposed increases in our rationality, Pinker allows political correctness to once again cloud his vision (659): “There are bad Negroes and there are good Negroes, just like there are bad white people and good white people. You can’t tell whether a person is good or bad by looking at the color of his skin.”

“Just like”? Is rationality supposed to overlook differences in black and white crime rates? Are all these statistics to be overlooked, ignored, deprecated, without furnishing a scintilla of a reason to do so? And this in the name of rationality? How can we explain the reluctance of cab drivers, pizza delivery men, etc., both black and white, to enter areas such as Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, East St. Louis? One wonders whether or not Pinker himself ventures into these areas of an evening? Is common sense to be tossed out of the window, and under the guise of rationality?¹²⁰

Turning on the dime once again, Pinker is nothing if not courageous in the next section of his book. He (662-664) explains our present relative peacefulness on the basis of our increasing intelligence, which is not that courageous, but then avers that this phenomenon is correlated with, caused by, an association with liberalism, and not the left “progressive” variety, but rather with classical liberalism, or libertarianism. Who am I to disagree with such keen insights? I wonder, though, why this does not apply to Pinker himself, who seems

to be rather an intelligent fellow, with very little “moral stupidity” except when it comes to his fetishes for political correctness, democracy, statism, etc. Pinker further burnishes his libertarian credentials when he writes (669): “... the 1960s slogans were right about one thing: there are moments in life when one really should cut loose and do one’s thing. Reason tells us what those moments are: the time when doing your thing does not impinge on other people’s freedom to do their thing.” Does he really, honestly, truly, mean it this time? No. He is a political weathervane, not confined by the niceties of the requirement of non-contradiction felt by us lesser mortals. He merrily zig-zags all through political economy, sometimes a libertarian, at other times a statolatrist, often in between. Ah, the luxury of such intellectual freedom.

Pinker very properly bemoans “economic illiteracy” (664) but three pages later (667) claimed that NAFTA “opened ... up” free trade. Compared to what?¹²¹ But practically in his very next breath he takes an eminently sensible stance (674-675): “Economists tell us that wealth originates not from land with stuff in it but from the mobilization of ingenuity, effort, and cooperation to turn that stuff into usable products. When people divide the labor and exchange its fruits, wealth can grow and everyone wins.” Well, *some* economists say things like this. But others, statists such as Krugman, Keynes, Stiglitz, Samuelson, maintain that wealth emanates from government expenditures. One wonders why a statist such as Pinker tips his hat to free market economists in this case, instead of those, such as he himself at times (markets do not apply to used body parts, etc.) who see prosperity as a result of government interference with the free enterprise system.

Speaking of economic illiteracy, consider the following (679):

“The advantage to a conqueror in gaining a bit more land is swamped by the disadvantage to

¹¹⁹ These brilliant insights of Hoppe (1993B, 1995) are controversial even in libertarian circles (Kinsella, 2002). To see Pinker (647-648) embracing them is nothing short of delightful.

¹²⁰ And what of Pinker’s own non politically correct statements on this matter (see text at footnote 108)? This most recent statement of his comes with particular ill grace given this contradiction

¹²¹ For a critique of the view that this customs union was an example of free trade, see McGee, 1994C; Murphy, 2006; Rockwell, 1995, 1996; Rothbard, 1993A, 1993B, 1993C, 1995; Tucker, 1995, 1996; Vance, 1996.

the family he kills in stealing it, and the few moments of drive reduction experienced by a rapist are obscenely out of proportion to the suffering he causes his victims. The asymmetry is ultimately a consequence of the law of entropy: an infinitesimal fraction of the states of the universe are orderly enough to support life and happiness, so it's easier to destroy and cause misery than to cultivate and cause happiness. All of this means that even the most steely-eyed utilitarian calculus, in which a disinterested observer tots up the total happiness and unhappiness, will deem violence undesirable, because it creates more unhappiness in its victims than happiness in its perpetrators, and lowers the aggregate amount of happiness in the world."

Here Pinker embraces the fallacy of interpersonal comparisons of utility, beloved of mainstream economists.¹²² There are no units of happiness. Even if there were, a silly assumption, there is no warrant for comparing them across persons. For all we know as a matter of science, the pleasure obtained by the rapist is 100 times greater than the displeasure suffered by his victim. The point is, we can "absolutely ... certainly, definitively, entirely, forever, indisputab(ly), irrefutab(ly), undoubtedly, and unquestionably" (666) never know any such thing. Nor do we need to do so. All we need is the NAP of libertarianism to condemn such a heinous practice, no matter *how* much enjoyment the rapist derives from it.

When Pinker is good, he is awfully, awfully good. Put this in your pipe and smoke it, Marxists (684):

"I suspect that among researchers, gentle commerce is just not a sexy idea. Cultural and intellectual elites have always felt superior to business people, and it doesn't occur to them to credit mere merchants with something as noble as peace."

Putting on his foreign policy spectacles, Pinker (691) asserts that it was "appeasement that led to the Second (World War)." Does he mention alternative explanations, let alone confront them? He does not. What are some alternative accounts? Here is one: the U.S. imperialist interest theory maintains that there were more American investments with firms in Great Britain than in Germany right before World War I. Had the U.S. not intervened then, this war would have ended inconclusively, with neither side a clear winner. It would have petered out. However, the U.S. stuck its thumb on the balance, and as a result the Allies emerged victorious. Then came the "peace" with the very punitive Treaty of Versailles, which led to the German hyperinflation of 1923 (Keynes, 1920), which gave rise to eloquent demagogues, which in turn promoted the career of one Adolph Hitler,¹²³ which resulted in his attempt to seize territory lost in World War I, which ended up with the so-called "appeasement."¹²⁴

End of Part II

Proceed with the Part III on the webpage:

http://www.mest.meste.org/MEST_Najava/II_24_3_block.pdf

¹²² In box 1 of the Dilbert cartoon, his boss says: "I'd like to begin the meeting by giving Dilbert some destructive criticism." Continues his boss in box 2: "Everything you do is dumb. I don't know why I hired you." The denouement in box 3, again from the boss: "I feel much more motivated now. If you feel a little bit worse, we came out ahead as a team." January 16, 2012, Scott Adams, Inc. Read that and weep, neoclassical economists, and Pinker.

¹²³ Who might otherwise ended up as a housepainter.

¹²⁴ For more on this revisionist story, see Barnes, 1982, 2004; Fay, 1967; Keynes, 1920; Nock, 2011; Radosh and Rothbard, 1972; Rothbard, 1972, 1989

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