

Acceptance speech

20 June 2023

Steven Pinker, awardee in the Humanities and Social Sciences category (15th edition)

I hope that the stupendous honor of this award, which I accept with humility and gratitude, will call attention not to me but to the Enlightenment ideals that have animated my thinking, namely that if we apply *reason* to the goal of improving human *flourishing*, we can gradually succeed. It is, I have argued, a humane and practicable alternative to destructive ideologies that try to find meaning in strong leaders, national glory, tribal purity, or struggle among racial and sexual identity groups.

An agenda for humankind would seem like a grandiose suggestion from a cognitive scientist. But the *philosophes* were insightful psychologists, and they noted that our institutions are ultimately reflections of human nature.

My own intellectual journey began with experiments on the psychology of auditory perception, visual imagery, and language. These topics raised deeper questions like, How do we acquire knowledge? What are the innate mental mechanisms that allow us to learn? Is the mind organized into distinct faculties? I tried to answer such questions with the idea that the mind is an evolved system of organs of computation that allowed our ancestors to understand and master their physical and social worlds.

I soon discovered that claims about how the mind works rooted in biology are not just scientific hypotheses but magnets for controversy. In *The Blank Slate*, I explored the moral, political, and emotional baggage associated with human nature and why the alternative doctrine that we are blank slates has had such historical appeal. My response was inspired in no small part by my fellow honoree Peter Singer: a progressive agenda is fully compatible with the idea of a rich human nature, which includes our faculty of sympathy (whose circle of inclusion can be expanded over the course of history by education and cosmopolitanism) and by our faculty of reason. As Spinoza wrote, "Those who are governed by reason desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of humankind."

As a social scientist I tried to back up the hypothesis of an expanding circle with data. I amassed a collection of graphs that plotted measures of violence over time, such as war, homicide, slavery, and the abuse of women and children, each snaking downward from the top left to the bottom right. They contradict our impression that the world is increasingly violent – a cognitive illusion arising from the fact that journalism feeds us the worst things happening on a given day and our habit of misestimating probability from available images and stories.

I tried to explain these trends with the help of a phrase from Abraham Lincoln, “the better angels of our nature.” Though the mind harbors inclinations to violence, particularly dominance, revenge, sadism, and exploitation, it also includes faculties that counteract them, such as self-control, morality, cognition, and sympathy.

I soon discovered that other measures of well-being have also improved, including longevity, prosperity, education, safety, and leisure. The ideal of progress is not a matter of optimism or idealism but a demonstrable empirical fact. It is by no means inevitable – the laws of nature are indifferent to our well-being – but depends on whether we continue to apply reason to improve human flourishing.

Adding to the incredulity that progress has happened is a cynicism that reason could possibly have propelled it. According to a popular view, human cognition is a bag of reflexes that leave us eternally vulnerable to biases and illusions. But this goes too far. Though we are indeed fallible creatures, we have honed our reasoning with tools like logic, probability, and the scientific method, and can correct each other’s fallacies through open criticism and debate. This underscores the necessity of the currently beleaguered principles of freedom of speech and inquiry.

I thank the Foundation for this honor, and close with a hope expressed by Anton Chekhov: “Humanity will become better when you show it what it is like.”