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Progress and Redemption: A Jewish Values Critique of Steven Pinker's "Enlightenment Now"

Cover Page Footnote

i. As I was reading Pinker's book and noting how virtually all of the evidence he reported supports his thesis in favor of the Enlightenment, I was reminded of an insightful Talmudic Law. In capital cases, if all 23 of the judges believe the defendant is guilty, the defendant is presumed innocent and let go. The idea being that if all of the judges interpret the evidence in the same direction something must be wrong with the underlying process that generates such unanimity. ii. "A modicum of anxiety may be the price we pay for the uncertainty of freedom. It is another word for the vigilance, deliberation, and heart-searching that freedom demands" (p. 285) iii. "It's not just the options opened up by personal autonomy that place a weight on the modern mind; it's also the great questions of existence. As people become better educated and increasingly skeptical of received authority, they may become unsatisfied with traditional religious verities and feel unmoored in a morally indifferent cosmos" (p. 285). iv. It may be hard for some old-fashioned readers to believe, but Steven Pinker is so opposed to acts of loving-kindness that he once wrote an op-ed in the New York Times mocking Mother Teresa. Here's how he began the essay. Which of the following people would you say is the most admirable: Mother Teresa, Bill Gates, or Norman Borlaug? And which do you think is the least admirable? For most people, it's an easy question. Mother Teresa, famous for ministering to the poor in Calcutta, has been beatified by the Vatican, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and ranked in an American poll as the most admired person of the 20th century. Bill Gates, infamous for giving us the Microsoft dancing paper clip and the blue screen of death, has been decapitated in effigy in "I Hate Gates" Web sites and hit with a pie in the face. As for Norman Borlaug . . . who the heck is Norman Borlaug? (2008) It turns out, though, according to Pinker that Borlaug should be the most admired because he is the scientific father of the "Green Revolution" in agriculture and his discoveries have saved billions of lives. Bill Gates should be number two on everyone's list because he "crunched the numbers" and is now using his billions of dollars in profits from Microsoft to help "alleviate the most misery by fighting everyday scourges in the developing world like malaria, diarrhea and parasites." And, finally, Mother Teresa should not be admired at all. Here's how Pinker summarizes her "accomplishments:" Mother Teresa, for her part, extolled the virtue of suffering and ran her well-financed missions accordingly: their sick patrons were offered plenty of prayer but harsh conditions, few analgesics and dangerously primitive medical care. Her hall-of-fame kindness was no kindness at all and this is not Steven Pinker's opinion but the hard, cold, scientific facts of the matter, at least according Steven Pinker. But why pick on poor Mother Teresa? Well, I suppose if you can demonstrate that her kindness was no kindness then it follows that any lesser forms of kindness than hers are not really acts of kindness either. If fact, the best reading of the op-ed is that there is no such thing as kindness in a world like Pinker's where we can always turn to do more science.

Steven Pinker's book, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, tells a provocative story. The central thesis is that about three hundred years ago human values and practices began to coalesce in ways that have allowed humans to live longer, healthier, safer, and more productive lives. This is an optimistic and comforting narrative, to the extent that it is true.

Particularly convincing to the reader are the measured data and informative tables Pinker uses throughout the text to illustrate and to confirm his story of exponential human progress. He tracks the changes to a broad set of variables, across scores of domains, over hundreds of years. In nearly every case, his basic thesis is supported. Pinker writes:

What is progress? You might think that the question is so subjective and culturally relative as to be forever unanswerable. In fact, it's one of the easier questions to answer. Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Sustenance is better than hunger. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny. Equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination. Literacy is better than illiteracy. Knowledge is better than ignorance. Intelligence is better than dull-wittedness. Happiness is better than misery. Opportunities to enjoy family, friends, culture, and nature are better than drudgery and monotony. *All these things can be measured.* If they have increased over time, that is progress.¹

Although many readers embrace Pinker's book – Bill Gates says it is the most inspiring book he has ever read – it has been criticized along several dimensions. These criticisms are worth identifying and discussing because they raise questions concerning his understanding of the Enlightenment, his methodology, his hyperbole, and, his allegedly overly conservative political biases. But, before we review these criticisms, I suggest in this paper that while Pinker's book has sustained some direct hits and significant damage from these various challenges, his central thesis – “that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition”² – still operates and continues to provide a *good enough* story for him to animate his data.

At a deeper level, not only does Pinker provide sufficient evidence to support his particular thesis, he also ably illustrates how the practice of science can generate meaningful human experiences and fulfilling lives, even without positing any special divine or supernatural purpose or purposes to the universe.

The Jewish values critique is based on an examination of two ancient Jewish practices: Sabbath observance and the performance of acts of loving-kindness. This critique does not nullify Pinker's deeper message about the meaning of science, but it does suggest that Pinker's view, while necessary is not sufficient for living a fully human life. A more encompassing and useful narrative than Pinker's would include the practice of science as a legitimate source of human meaning and values among many other practices, including those legitimated outside of a scientific paradigm. Unlike Pinker's either/or story, the story I want to tell here is both/and.

As even some of his most pointed critics have noted this is a powerful and generative book worth thinking about. It is a timely story that merits telling because of his emphasis on the critical importance of ideas and values to long-run human wellbeing.

¹ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018), 3.

² *Ibid*, 53.

His book is a reminder that while technology has brought with it dazzling gadgets, it has also profoundly changed our lives for the better. And perhaps even more importantly, his good enough story is – to some extent – convincing that there is sufficient cause for optimism that we can continue to successfully deal with emerging human problems.

In the next section, I summarize the most important criticisms that have been lodged at Pinker. In Section II, I argue that despite these criticisms, Pinker’s general story survives the onslaught. In Section III, I offer a more encompassing narrative that includes Pinker’s story but, based on a Jewish values critique, offers a more inclusive perspective on the search for human meaning in what often *does seem like* an indifferent universe.

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO PINKER’S *ENLIGHTENMENT NOW*

Many reviewers have been extremely critical of Pinker’s book. Below I offer five observations, based on the most important of these criticisms.

Mischaracterizing the Enlightenment

Pinker misrepresents the history of the Enlightenment. His “anti-intellectual” approach³ is revealed through his extremely simplistic and misleading representation of the Enlightenment. Two examples of this include: 1) Pinker’s unproblematic use of the term reason, throughout his text, when in fact, Enlightenment philosophers continuously debated the appropriate parameters of reason and never did settle on a single definition;⁴ and, 2) while Pinker assumes that Enlightenment thinkers universally endorsed liberalism, this was a hotly contested concept⁵ and no single perspective ever emerged here either.

Cherry-Picking the Data

In selecting his variables to assess outcomes over time, Pinker selects only those variables that support his thesis of progress. He either ignores negative outcomes altogether or attributes them to anti-enlightenment sources and/or rogue scientists who were not really Enlightenment figures, in the first place, according to Pinker.⁶

³ David A. Bell, “The PowerPoint Philosopher,” *The Nation*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/waiting-for-steven-pinkers-enlightenment/> (accessed August 16th, 2019).

⁴ Peter Harrison, “The Enlightenment of Steven Pinker,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-enlightenment-of-steven-pinker/10094966> (accessed August 16, 2019).

⁵ John Gray, “Unenlightened thinking: Steven Pinker’s embarrassing new book is a feeble sermon for rattled liberals,” *New Statesman*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2018/02/unenlightened-thinking-steven-pinker-s-embarrassing-new-book-feeble-sermon> (accessed August 16, 2019).

⁶ Conor Lynch, “‘Enlightenment Now’: Steven Pinker’s grand apology for capitalism,” *Salon*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/03/10/enlightenment-now-steven-pinkers-grand-apology-for-capitalism-tk/> (accessed August 16, 2019).

Failing to Establish a Cause and Effect Relationship

Given 1 and 2 above, how do we really know if it was the Enlightenment that caused progress, as Pinker asserts, or if progress was achieved in spite of the Enlightenment?⁷

Scientism Cannot Dictate Human Values

Pinker's methodology relies excessively on a belief in the efficacy of scientific method. But as John Gray⁸ and William Davies⁹ note, science cannot determine human values.

This Book is Really All Just a Grand Apology for Capitalism

Given his misrepresentation of the Enlightenment and his overly optimistic reading of the data – everything is wonderful – Pinker's political prescriptions are biased and excessively conservative. In Lynch's¹⁰ terms, the whole enterprise is a “grand apology for capitalism” or in Bell's words the book is nothing more than a defense of “technocratic neo-liberalism.”¹¹

WHY PINKER'S STORY IS GOOD ENOUGH

The sheer magnitude of Pinker's truly monumental project is, in some sense, overwhelming. Ada Palmer has put this point as follows:

Charts are easy to niggle at... But if one reads them fairly, the majority of the data and analyses Pinker provides are convincing, painting a repetitive and unrelenting portrait of improvement. Repetitive and unrelenting are rarely positive qualities in a book, but here they genuinely are, because the case Pinker seeks to make is at once so basic and so difficult that a firehose of evidence may be needed—optimism is a hard sell in this historical moment.¹²

It is hard to read Pinker's book and to then deny the overwhelmingly consistent and positive changes in terms of life span, health, nutrition, literacy, peace, leisure time, liberty, wealth, and safety. Further, there can be little doubt that many of these positive changes are related either directly or indirectly to the Enlightenment's endorsement and propagation of reason and science as among some of the necessary tools to advance the human condition. Let us dig a little deeper though and return to each of the five criticisms identified above and examine them in turn more closely:

⁷ Harrison.

⁸ Gray.

⁹ William Davies, “Life is getting Better,” *The Guardian*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/14/enlightenment-now-steven-pinker-review> (accessed August 16, 2019).

¹⁰ Lynch.

¹¹ Bell.

¹² Ada Palmer, “Can Science Justify Itself?” *Harvard Magazine*, March-April, 2018, <https://harvardmagazine.com/2018/03/steven-pinker-enlightenment-now> (accessed August 16, 2019).

Mischaracterizing the Enlightenment:

Admittedly, Steven Pinker's view of the Enlightenment is incredibly simplified and confusing, so much so that perhaps he should not have used the term enlightenment at all (see especially Harrison¹³ and Gray¹⁴).

Nevertheless, his modern ideology does hang together for the most part and its simplicity may turn out to be an advantage rather than a limitation. His view can be characterized by a set of beliefs as follows:

A – All genuine questions have answers. We can find answers to these questions through careful observation and evidence. And, all of the answers are compatible. This last observation, dubbed the “jigsaw puzzle view of the world,” implies that from a purely scientific perspective the universe cannot contain even one real paradox.

B – Reason can and must be separated from emotions.

C – Human nature cannot be shaped or changed. All values are grounded in a set of fixed human needs and are universal in scope.

D – Individuals should be understood primarily as distinct from the cultures and societies in which they are embedded and therefore utilitarianism is the single best theory of morality (although Pinker himself disputes the claim that he is merely a utilitarian).

E – And, most importantly for Pinker, we live in a meaningless universe.

In Pinker's mind, to apply human knowledge in order to enhance human welfare (i.e. adopting the modern scientific consciousness identified above) is about as close as one can hope to live a significant life in an meaningless universe.

Pinker's beliefs represent a coherent world-view, even if no historical Enlightenment figure ever held them. These beliefs do usefully represent a simplified and useful version of the modern scientific view of the world. And, many scientists share them. Whether or not they constitute the beliefs of “the Enlightenment,” these particular beliefs, as put into practice more or less by working scientists all over the world, certainly *may have* impacted the world over time in measurable ways. In any event, I believe that Pinker has certainly made the case that it is worth looking into this question.

Cherry-Picking the Data

¹³ Harrison.

¹⁴ Gray.

It is true that Pinker avoids measuring outcomes that would have weakened his basic thesis. His relative disinterest in increases in income and wealth inequality over time, for example, leads him to disregard or downplay the increasing political power amassed over the last 30 years by corporate interests, especially in the Western industrialized countries.

His failure to measure the full effects of the erosion of community over time and his failure to count this erosion as a major cost of progress represents a weakness of his methodology.¹⁵ More damaging to his overall argument, though, is his failure to acknowledge some role for the modern scientific view of the world in contributing to the Holocaust and to other historical failures like slavery and eugenics. Pinker's argument is that science has never contributed to historical failures, at worst it is a handful of rogue scientists who misunderstood science and are to blame. This weak excuse harms the credibility of Pinker's argument more than it helps him.

Still, no one can doubt Pinker's earnest attempts to get all of this right. In the final analysis, cherry-picking the data is a common limitation of empirical studies like this and it implies not that his book is wrong, but that theoretically, at least, the methodology can be improved. While these improvements would make the book more complex, in the end, it would actually make the book more convincing rather than less.¹⁶

Failing to Establish a Cause and Effect Relationship

How do we know that all this progress did not take place *in spite of*, the Enlightenment and not *because of it*? Good question.

The answer is that we don't know with certainty that the Enlightenment world-view as understood by Pinker caused exponential growth and progress across a dizzying array of life sustaining metrics. But no amount of criticism concerning Pinker's methodologies and frequent use of hyperbole, will nullify his theory. The only way to beat his good enough story, in the end, is with a better story. To date, none of the criticisms even come close to offering a believable alternative explanation to his data.

Scientism Cannot Dictate Human Values

That Pinker may be an overly zealous practitioner of science is almost self-evidently true. This may even constitute his most peculiar brand of genius and makes it both such a joy and such a trial to read his book. In fact, Pinker's scientific findings are not designed to support and justify his search for meaning, as this criticism suggests it does, but Pinker's deeper point is to illustrate that the scientific life and its single-minded pursuit of truth is what constitutes a fully meaningful and satisfying life, in an otherwise meaningless universe.

¹⁵ Alison Gopnik, "When Truth and Reason are No Longer Enough, The Atlantic, April 20, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/steven-pinker-enlightenment-now/554054/> (accessed August 16, 2019).

¹⁶ As I was reading Pinker's book and noting how virtually all of the evidence he reported supports his thesis in favor of the Enlightenment, I was reminded of an insightful Talmudic Law. In capital cases, if all 23 of the judges believe the defendant is guilty, the defendant is presumed innocent and let go. The idea being that if all of the judges interpret the evidence in the same direction something must be wrong with the underlying process that generates such unanimity.

This Book is Really All Just a Grand Apology for Capitalism

The suggestion that Pinker believes that all is good in every domain is simply a false reading of his book. He writes explicitly that “the effort needed to prevent climate change is immense, and we have no guarantee that the necessary transformations in technology and politics will be in place soon enough to slow down global warming.” In fact, he continues, “Humanity has never faced a problem like it [global warming]”¹⁷

An important reason Pinker has written this book is to provide us with sufficient optimism to face the problems associated with climate change and other existential threats like nuclear obliteration. His implied argument goes something like this. “Look at all of the great things we have accomplished through the scientific approach to life so far. Sure we have real problems, but we can solve them not through magical thinking but through reason and empirical observation of how the world really works.” Included among his solutions are calls for significant market limitations, as well.

To summarize, there is plenty to complain about in Steven Pinker’s book *Enlightenment Now*. Nevertheless, his story – “that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition”¹⁸ – may not be perfect and may not even constitute a “true explanation”¹⁹ as Pinker would understand it, but it is plausible and good enough, as far as it goes. So the Pinker problem is not that he is wrong on the most important stuff, but that his story does not go far enough.

THE NEED TO BROADEN PINKER’S STORY: A JEWISH VALUES CRITIQUE

An anomaly, in science, is when actual outcomes do not fit with predicted outcomes, based on a widely accepted theory or model. Pinker dutifully uncovers one such anomaly to his theory when he discovers the increase in anxiety over time in the US and other developed countries.

He writes with no smidgen of irony, “Let’s agree that the citizens of developed countries are not as happy as they ought to be, given the fantastic progress in their fortunes and freedom.” He elaborates:

When it comes to happiness, many people are underachievers. Americans are laggards among their first-world peers, and their happiness has stagnated in the era sometimes called the American Century. The Baby Boomers, despite growing up in peace and prosperity, have proved to be a troubled generation, to the mystification of their parents, who lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and (for many of my peers) the Holocaust... Anxiety and some depressive symptoms may have increased in the postwar decades, at least in some people.²⁰

Let’s call this difference between how happy we ought to be, according to Pinker’s theory, and how happy we actually are, given the fantastic progress in fortunes and

¹⁷ Pinker, 152.

¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁰ Ibid., 268.

freedom, the *anxiety gap*. Pinker, of course, needs to explain this gap away and he does just that with several seemingly contradictory arguments. In some of the least convincing prose in the entire book, Pinker writes that anxiety is just the price we pay for progress.²¹ Or, a little later, he suggests that anxiety is what you feel when you are smart enough to realize that you live in a universe devoid of purpose.²² In any event, if you think about it, anxiety is really a good thing:

A bit of anxiety is not a bad thing if it motivates people to support policies that would help solve major problems. In earlier decades people might have offloaded their worries to a higher authority, and some still do.²³

And, finally, he tells us to stop complaining already and appreciate being a grown-up:

Though people today are happier, they are not as happy as one might expect, perhaps because they have an adult's appreciation of life, with all its worry and all its excitement.²⁴

But maybe the *anxiety gap* is not an anomaly to be explained away at all. What if it is an informative signal of the inherent limits of a modern consciousness and what it can deliver? Perhaps, contrary to Pinker, the pursuit of truth in the search for bettering the human condition in an otherwise meaningless universe falls short of constituting a fully meaningful life for everyone. Pinker himself observes "The idea that the ultimate good is to use knowledge to enhance human welfare leaves people cold."²⁵ He just thinks that these people are wrong to feel "cold," presumably because they lack the correct knowledge. But imagine if the *anxiety gap* does not represent a need to obtain even more knowledge, but an indication that one senses a need for different kinds of experiences and practices beyond the single experience of creating and applying knowledge in order to "control" the world. *Are there valuable things to do in the world besides for controlling it?*

I agree with Pinker when he observes, "most people prioritize life, health, safety, literacy, sustenance, and stimulation for the obvious reason that these goods are a prerequisite to everything else."²⁶ But, his list of basic goods purposefully ignores the value and meaning of many *lost practices* that humans had embraced not just for centuries but for millennia and that many continue to embrace.

In the approximately 300 years since the Enlightenment project began, it is unquestionable that many valuable human practices and experiences have been lost or have become harder to sustain. Just like animal species can become extinct over time as

²¹ "A modicum of anxiety may be the price we pay for the uncertainty of freedom. It is another word for the vigilance, deliberation, and heart-searching that freedom demands" Pinker, 285.

²² "It's not just the options opened up by personal autonomy that place a weight on the modern mind; it's also the great questions of existence. As people become better educated and increasingly skeptical of received authority, they may become unsatisfied with traditional religious verities and feel unmoored in a morally indifferent cosmos" (Pinker, 285).

²³ *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

the environmental conditions necessary for their survival alter over time, so too can valuable human goods become extinct, when the necessary cultural conditions for their survival cease to exist.

Let's examine a couple examples of *lost practices*. But before I begin, I plead guilty to a *Jewish bias* here. I trust that others working out of other faith traditions and other traditional communities, religious or secular, can provide their own examples of lost experiences. The two goods I focus on here are observance of Sabbath and the practice of loving-kindness. I select these specific practices in particular because I believe that these practices embed values that are not only good in and of themselves, but that these specific practices might be of particular help to us as we deal with the *anxiety gap* documented by Pinker, and associated with unfettered progress. Such valuable and meaningful practices, are not designed with utilitarian considerations in mind and they lack universal appeal. It is not at all surprising, then, that they are irrelevant to Pinker's story. Nevertheless, these practices can substantially broaden Pinker's narrative of human progress while doing it no harm.

Sabbath Observance

Observing the Sabbath makes no knowledge claims other than the need to familiarize your self with the traditional (and emerging) practices associated with it in the same way that playing baseball makes no knowledge claims other than knowing its rules. To observe the Sabbath appropriately, one needs a bottle of wine, two loaves of special bread, a festive meal, a supportive community, family, good friends, shared songs and stories, and, the ability to develop a regular habit of finding time to put aside the world of work, competition, control, and accomplishment, in favor of embracing a parallel world of rest, contemplation, bodily pleasures, joy, playfulness, acceptance, gratitude, wonder, and, on occasion, radical amazement, once every seven days. All the while, we recognize that this parallel world is really *the exact same world we live in* during the remaining six days of the week.

The accomplishment of achieving a "Sabbath Consciousness" is no easy task and requires practice, expert advice, and experimentation. This is true in a world dazzled by the promises of progress, science, 24/7 online technology, and global communications. It is especially difficult to achieve in the face of continuous competition for power and survival and the growing fears of the contemporary world.

Rabbi David Hartman, the late Israeli rabbi, elaborates on the Jewish Sabbath and its implications for contemporary life. He writes:

Halakhah [Jewish law] prohibits my plucking a flower from my garden or doing with it as I please [on the Sabbath]. At sunset the flower becomes a "thou" with a right to existence irrespective of its instrumental value for me. I stand silently before nature as before a fellow creature and not as before an object of my control.²⁷

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one the greatest rabbis of the last century, a teacher and poet, provides one of the single best articulations of a Sabbath Consciousness: He writes:

²⁷ David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices within Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), 78.

To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.²⁸

Sabbath Consciousness gives little or no explicit guidance on how to deal with specific problems and issues as they arise. For this we need the input of scientists, politicians, and many others. A Sabbath Consciousness does, however, spill over into the remaining six days of work and demand that we learn how to hold scientists and researchers accountable for the long-term effects of their work, regardless of how productive, interesting and creative the work may seem to them.

Certainly not everyone hears God's commandment not to pluck a flower on the Sabbath. In proposing Sabbath observance as a contemporary practice, one worth re-invigorating in today's world, I assume very little about Jewish theology and beliefs. What I do suggest, however, is that nearly everyone can hear the echo of Rabbi Heschel's claim that there is an important aspect of life where the goal is "not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord."

I write about the Sabbath here because it provides a concrete, time-tested, and meaningful complement, and an additional layer of profound meaning, to the practice of science as articulated by Steven Pinker, even if the observance of the Sabbath is *not* something that can be quantified.

From Pinker's point of view, he might concede that a Sabbath Consciousness, *if it could somehow be achieved*, might potentially alleviate the tensions associated with the *anxiety gap*. This can actually be a testable hypothesis, from his perspective. His criticism, however, would be that such a consciousness if it were to exist must of necessity be a *false* one. God, since He does not exist, could not possibly have created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh. That, to Pinker's way of thinking, is at best a fairy tale to tell children to help them sleep at night and does not make any sense at all in the real world as revealed by science.

From my perspective science is one of the ways to construct meaning in a universe like ours. Science is the only known tool for creating and applying the knowledge of how the world works from a practical perspective. And, if you are contemplating surgery, I suggest that you make sure your doctor is an orthodox practitioner of science, while she dissects you in order to cure you. The scientific ideology, as identified above, includes beliefs about the impossibility of paradox, the need to separate reason from emotion, and several others. While these beliefs have proven useful and practical to our species over time, as documented by Pinker, I suggest that we treat these beliefs like rules of a particularly important game rather than treating them as beliefs that actually reflect something about the metaphysical "truth" of reality. In practicing science, we need only to treat these rules *as if* they are really true, at least, for the specific purposes at hand.

²⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 3.

In observing the Sabbath every seventh day, we relax our hold on these scientific rules. We entertain the possibility that there are worthy questions with no answers, and we accept the fact that sometimes the answers we do get don't all fit together. Rather than assuming that all paradox is impossible, we playfully engage with paradoxes of all sorts. We loosen the certainty with which we assert that the universe is meaningless. And, we learn to live not just with an optimistic desire for the kind of progress that can be counted, but we flirt with the hope of redemption, both the everyday redemption that opens up qualitatively different levels of consciousness and its more radical messianic versions. In observing the Sabbath we acknowledge with Pinker that "health is better than sickness," but we also toy with the thought that hope is even better than optimism and that redemption complements progress. Our primary relationship to the world oscillates from one of control to a stance of appreciation, accord, and gratitude. In observing the Sabbath, we start to see the world less like a jigsaw puzzle for us to figure out and more like a wonderful and mysterious work of art to contemplate; a work that paradoxically contains and safely holds us and at the same time a work-in-progress that we can step out of and manipulate to our own satisfactions.

The Practice of Loving-Kindness

Neither kindness nor Sabbath observance have become extinct in the modern world, but the ability to engage in these types of practices has become significantly more difficult as the contemporary culture becomes less supportive of them. And, since these practices cannot easily be counted, it is wrongly assumed that they just don't count at all. The word "kindness," for example, does not appear a single time in the index to Pinker's 537 page tome on progress.

Here is how the psychoanalyst Adam Philips and the historian Barbara Taylor describe our current age:

The self without sympathetic attachments [kindness] is either a fiction or a lunatic. Modern Western society resists this fundamental truth, valuing independence above all things. Needing others is perceived as a weakness. Only small children, the sick, and the very elderly are permitted dependence on others; for everyone else, self-sufficiency and autonomy are cardinal virtues.²⁹

It is hardly surprising that in a world enchanted by science, that kindness would be downgraded, if not completely eliminated. Recall the "rules" of science as expressed by Pinker, especially his beliefs that 1-reason can and must be separated from emotions, 2-individuals are the only relevant unit of analysis, and 3-utilitarianism is science's own theory of morality. Under these severe constraints, it is almost impossible to come up with situations that might call for uncertain and open-ended acts of human kindness rather than following well-known ethical algorithms like adding up human happiness, subtracting human misery, and then fulfilling our duty accordingly.³⁰

²⁹ Adam Philips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 95.

³⁰ It may be hard for some old-fashioned readers to believe, but Steven Pinker is so opposed to acts of loving-kindness that he once wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* mocking Mother Teresa. Here's how he began the essay.

From a Jewish values perspective (and from virtually every religious perspective, see footnote 4), it is taken as almost axiomatic that living a life loyal to the aspiration of loving-kindness will increase human flourishing, even if it does not increase the stock of knowledge. In Jewish thought, kindness is one of the three pillars along with Torah and Service, upon which the world rests. Abraham, the very first self-identified Jew, is known primarily, by the rabbis, for his virtue of kindness. The second Temple in Jerusalem was understood in Rabbinic thought to have been destroyed – not by the Romans as historians might think – but because of a lack of kindness among the Jewish citizens. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, in the wake of the Temple’s destruction, boldly posited that kindness now replaces sacrifice as the primary means of atonement. Finally, observant Jews are reminded every morning in the Prayer Service that kindness is one of the few *mitzvot* (commandments) where there is no “fixed measure.” How could there be, since kindness is not something that can be quantified?

While Sabbath observance involves us with a few ritual objects, to perform acts of loving-kindness one needs first only an ability to sympathize with our fellow human beings and to allow others to sympathize with us. One needs the time to give to others our undivided attention, and the moral imagination to conceive and implement simple deeds, reflecting our care and love for others. The possibilities for kindness are endless. In adopting the Kindness Consciousness, emotions, *aided by* reason, motivate action. The sovereign individual recedes from the foreground in favor of a fully socialized notion of personhood. And, purely utilitarian concerns are beside the point. Kindness involves us

Which of the following people would you say is the most admirable: Mother Teresa, Bill Gates, or Norman Borlaug? And which do you think is the least admirable? For most people, it’s an easy question. Mother Teresa, famous for ministering to the poor in Calcutta, has been beatified by the Vatican, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and ranked in an American poll as the most admired person of the 20th century. Bill Gates, infamous for giving us the Microsoft dancing paper clip and the blue screen of death, has been decapitated in effigy in “I Hate Gates” Web sites and hit with a pie in the face. As for Norman Borlaug . . . who the heck is Norman Borlaug? (Steven Pinker, “The Moral Instinct,” *The New York Times*, January 13, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/magazine/13Psychology-t.html> (accessed August 16, 2019).

It turns out, though, according to Pinker that Borlaug should be the most admired because he is the scientific father of the “Green Revolution” in agriculture and his discoveries have saved billions of lives. Bill Gates should be number two on everyone’s list because he “crunched the numbers” and is now using his billions of dollars in profits from Microsoft to help “alleviate the most misery by fighting everyday scourges in the developing world like malaria, diarrhea and parasites.” And, finally, Mother Teresa should not be admired at all. Here’s how Pinker summarizes her “accomplishments:”

Mother Teresa, for her part, extolled the virtue of suffering and ran her well-financed missions accordingly: their sick patrons were offered plenty of prayer but harsh conditions, few analgesics and dangerously primitive medical care. (Ibid.)

Her hall-of-fame kindness was no kindness at all and this is not Steven Pinker’s opinion but the hard, cold, scientific facts of the matter, at least according Steven Pinker. But why pick on poor Mother Teresa? Well, I suppose if you can demonstrate that her kindness was no kindness then it follows that any lesser forms of kindness than hers are not really acts of kindness either. If fact, the best reading of the op-ed is that there is no such thing as kindness in a world like Pinker’s where we can always turn to do more science.

with other people, often in quite messy ways, and reminds us of our own and of other people's vulnerability. Indeed, it is acts of kindness performed on a regular basis that create and sustain community and enrich human solidarity.

Acts of kindness are always primarily performed simply for the sake of performing them. This, of course, makes no sense from a utilitarian point of view where strictly speaking actions themselves are irrelevant and it is only future outcomes that matter to us. We choose to act kindly not because we are commanded to but because we recognize that it is through such acts that we express our own uniqueness even as we experience first-hand the solidarity that such acts of kindness can potentially create.

For many, kindness is a singularly important practice that makes life meaningful. The ability to reveal our particular loves and concerns in the world is an opportunity to celebrate life together in community. In Judaism such acts are considered *lifnim mishurat hadin* i.e. beyond the letter of the law. These types of supererogatory actions are good to do but not bad not to do. Kindness is a way we can experiment with stretching our conception of what it means to be human and directly challenge Pinker's scientific beliefs that human nature is fixed and unchanging.

Kindness is no panacea and things can go wrong as often as they go right. What if one's love is harmful? The Kindness Consciousness is no more real than the Sabbath Consciousness or the Scientific Consciousness. None of these modes of being really tell us anything about the "truth" of reality. We dip in and out of these alternative ways of constructing human meaning in order to experience diverse and necessary aspects of a fulfilling life.

It is hard to imagine coming up with a higher order algorithm to choose among them or to integrate them into a single worldview. The best we can do is to work with one another to create a pluralistic society that self-consciously sustains these particular experiences and practices, and many other meaningful activities, and to choose among them with wisdom, patience, and luck. Remember that doctor you chose because she was a fully orthodox practitioner of science while she was dissecting you. Well, you should *also* make sure she is a practitioner of kindness, as she exits the operating room and speaks with your loved ones about the success or failure of your procedure. I imagine even Steven Pinker would agree with this.

More science does not mean less kindness nor does more kindness mean less science. Good science, in many ways, depends upon the kindness of scientists and impactful kindness depends upon the knowledge produced by science.

CONCLUSION

One of the criticisms against Steven Pinker is that he is too optimistic about the future. I believe, though, that his contagious optimism is a great gift to the rest of us. Without the shared belief that understanding the world helps us improve it, we are all doomed. Ironically, it turns out, Pinker's monumental defense of science, viewed from a slightly different perspective, say a kindness perspective, is at the same time a prodigious example of an act of loving-kindness, whether Pinker is willing to admit to this or not. The world is a much less frightening and anxious place thanks to *Enlightenment Now*, even though this is something that cannot be measured precisely or counted. The book, in the final analysis, is appropriately optimistic. And, ultimately, Pinker's unflinching belief

in progress cannot be easily disentangled from a hope in redemption, if not a transcendent version of redemption, at least a redemption of the everyday sort, one where consciousness is expanded and human possibilities multiplied.