

## Steven Pinker

*Dr. Pinker is the Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and the author of How the Mind Works, The Blank Slate, and The Better Angels of Our Nature. In 2006 he was honored as Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association.*

Two epiphanies set me on my path to humanism. One was a gradual development in my professional life as a cognitive scientist. My conviction that the mind is a product of the brain, that the brain is a product of evolution, and that moral systems must be informed by a scientific mindset, led me to question the common belief that religion is a major source of morality. The other was sudden: coming across the many passages from the Old Testament in which God commands his people to commit rape and genocide.

Nonetheless, I maintain an affection for the traditions of Judaism that I grew up with, and still follow one or two selectively. The traditions were those of Reform Judaism, so they were far from onerous in the first place. At the same time, I enjoy being able to take back the two evenings and days of the High Holidays rather than spending them in a temple. The services have moments of beauty, but virtually the entire liturgy consists of groveling to an egotistical God who is insatiable for flattery, and it began to grate on my nerves.

“How did my family, friends, and colleagues react when I told them about my path to humanism?” I never did tell them because I never thought there was anything to tell. My parents and sister are slightly more observant than I am, and while they don’t identify themselves as “humanists,” their beliefs are probably indistinguishable from mine. My brother is even cooler toward religion, so there was no problem at all there.

Being a humanist doesn’t require hostility toward the beliefs and practices of others. It simply means basing morality and meaning on reason and science rather than on religion, faith, revelation, tradition, or dogma. Although I always have had a vague sense that a scientific understanding of human nature was compatible with a robust secular morality, it was only through the intellectual influence of the philosopher and novelist Rebecca Newberger Goldstein (to whom I am married) that I understood the logic connecting them. (Rebecca, by the way, was recognized as Humanist of the Year in 2011 by the American Humanist Association.) She explained to me how morality can be grounded in rationality, and how secular humanism is just a modern term for the worldview that grew out of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment (in particular, she asserts, from the ideas of Baruch Spinoza). As I noted in my book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, to the extent that the decline of violence has been driven by ideas, it is this set of ideas, which I call Enlightenment humanism, that has driven it.

This seems like a good opportunity to share some ideas I have written or spoken about over the past few years which are relevant to my path to humanism. They are:

Morality is not a set of arbitrary regulations dictated by a vengeful deity and written down in a book, nor is it the custom of a particular culture or tribe. It is a consequence of the interchangeability of perspectives and the opportunity the world provides for positive-sum games.

Morality is not just any old topic in psychology but close to our conception of the meaning of life. Moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings.

It was natural to think that living things must be the handiwork of a designer. But it was also natural to think that the sun went around the Earth. Overcoming naïve impressions to figure out how things really work is one of humanity's highest callings.

The doctrine of the sacredness of the soul sounds vaguely uplifting but in fact is highly malignant. It discounts life on earth as just a temporary phase that people pass through—indeed, an infinitesimal fraction of their existence. The gradual replacement of *lives* for *souls* as the locus of moral value was helped along by the ascendancy of skepticism and reason.

The indispensability of reason does not imply that individual people are always rational or are unswayed by passion and illusion. It only means that people are *capable* of reason, and that a community of people that chooses to perfect this faculty and to exercise it openly and fairly can collectively think their way to sounder conclusions in the long run. As Abraham Lincoln observed, “You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time.”