

Does Science Have All the Answers?

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By Eric Metaxas

MANHATTAN, N.Y.—Things sure are getting better now that science has all the answers. At least that’s what one Harvard professor thinks.

On their classic *Sgt. Pepper* album, the Beatles sang “I’ve got to admit it’s getting better . . . A little better all the time.”

This ode to optimism was interspersed with lines like “it can’t get no worse.” Obviously, the lads from Liverpool weren’t entirely convinced.

Things are getting better

But a prominent scientist has written a best-selling book arguing that things are getting better and will continue to do so. But his argument is far from convincing.

The book is *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* by Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker.

In Pinker’s estimation, “None of us are as happy as we ought to be, given how amazing our world has become.”

He is annoyed that people are moaning, whining, carping and, to use a delightful Yiddish word, *kvetching* “as much as ever” despite how awesome the world has become.

In some respects, he’s correct. On average, people in the industrialized world enjoy a standard of living their not-too-distant ancestors couldn’t have dreamed of.

Widespread famine, which killed millions of Europeans less than two hundred years ago, and killed millions of Indians less than 75 years ago, is all but extinct.

And Pinker is correct that science deserves much of the credit. The “Green Revolution” of the 1960s and ‘70s turned Paul Ehrlich’s book *The Population Bomb* into science fiction.

More peaceful?

But, while we do have a lot to be grateful for, the world is nowhere near as paradisaical as he makes it sound.

Take war and violence.

In his previous book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Pinker argues that the world is getting more peaceful and more just. He continues that argument here.

But “what about World Wars I and II? Or the civil wars that left tens of millions dead since the end of World War II?” you ask.

Here is his answer.

- First, we haven’t had a World War since 1945.
- Second, the only such war going on now is the one in Syria.

Ergo, such wars must be a thing of the past. Seriously?

Ideology of scientism

No wonder that the *New York Times* called Pinker’s “chipper triumphalism” a “version of magical thinking.” But Pinker would no doubt insist that it isn’t magic but, instead, science.

In his review of *Enlightenment Now*, philosopher John Gray called Pinker “an evangelist for science—or, to be more exact, an ideology of scientism.”

Scientism, according to historian T.J. Jackson Lears, is the “faith” that “science has discovered (or is about to discover) all the important truths about human life.”

Or, as one leading proponent of scientism—the late Stephen Hawking—put it: “The scientific account is complete. Theology is unnecessary.”

Can’t eliminate all evil

The problem is that, as Gray writes, “science cannot dictate human values.” He points out what Pinker obscures, ignores and tries to explain away: A great deal of evil has been committed by those claiming to act in accordance with the dictates of science.

Scientism has given us “Marxism-Leninism, Nazism,” and what historian Thomas Leonard called the “illiberal reformers” of early-20th-century America most responsible for eugenics.

“Science” wasn’t enough to prevent one of the darkest moments in American history, the Tuskegee Experiment, in which 400 black men with syphilis were purposely left untreated to study the effects of the disease.

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