As one becomes aware of the historical decline of violence, the world begins to look different. The past seems less innocent, the present less sinister. One starts to appreciate the small gifts of coexistence that would have seemed utopian to our ancestors: the interracial family playing in the park, the comedian who lands a zinger on the commander in chief, the countries that quietly back away from a crisis instead of escalating to war.

For all the tribulations in our lives, for all the troubles that remain in the world, the decline of violence is an accomplishment that we can savor—and an impetus to cherish the forces of civilization and enlightenment that made it possible.

The Reader's Presence

1. Summarize the points that inform Pinker's claim that "[v]iolence has been in decline for thousands of years" (paragraph 3). What does Pinker identify as one of the earliest lifestyle changes that led to a more-peaceful coexistence? What kinds of past violence does he focus on, and how does he use this information to build his case? Pinker recognizes that his argument is often met with "skepticism, incredulity, and sometimes anger" (paragraph 5). Why do you think his claim provokes such strong reactions? What was your reaction to reading paragraph 3? How is—or isn't—your reaction consistent with Pinker's argument about the incessant coverage of violence in the media?

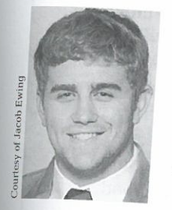
2. What reasons does Pinker provide for humankind's historical "process of pacification" (paragraph 8)? Although violence is declining, as Pinker writes, how do you explain our cultural fascination with violence throughout history, including "the Old Testament and the crucifixions in the New, the gory mutilations in Shakespeare's tragedies and Grimm's fairy tales, [and] the British monarchs who beheaded their relatives and the American founders who dueled with their rivals" (paragraph 6)? Pinker discusses other factors in the "declines of violence" (paragraph 7). What important areas might he have overlooked? What correlation, if any, can you establish between the decline of violence and the prevalence of violence in the arts?

3. Trade and commerce play an important role in Pinker's argument about the historical decline of violence; violence is, he observes, "a dead loss—forgone opportunities to extract taxes" (paragraph 11), and "people become more valuable alive than dead" (paragraph 31). To what extent can this assertion be viewed as a form of "reciprocal altruism" (paragraph 31)? To what extent do you find the reliance on money for peace to be troubling? What sorts of issues surface when people view each other in monetary terms?

4. **CONNECTIONS:** Consider the substance of Pinker's points about viewing people in monetary terms, and then compare and contrast these points with Andre Dubus III's treatment of similar issues in "The Land of No: Love in a Class-riven America" (page 112) and the opening paragraphs of Annie Dillard's essay "This Is the Life" (page 382). Which writer's view of the relationship between identity and money do you find most convincing? Explain why. Support your response by analyzing specific passages from each text in detail.

Student Essay

JACOB EWING
Steven Pinker and the Question of Violence


Courtesy of Jacob Ewing

At the time he wrote "Steven Pinker and the Question of Violence," Jacob Ewing was a junior at Ashland University in Ohio, where he majored in English and Spanish. In preparing to write, Ewing admits he thought Pinker's tone had "an air of finality, as though no arguments could be made to the contrary. I wanted to ask a few more questions before we closed the discussion."

His essay was in response to the following assignment:

> Steven Pinker's recent book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* has provoked a great deal of discussion. After reading carefully the essay, "Violence Vanquished," adapted from the book by the *Wall Street Journal*, join the controversy by writing a response to Pinker in which you confirm and/or challenge some of his findings and conclusions. Be sure to select several specific claims that Pinker makes and systematically point out their merits or weaknesses. You may bring in additional readings to support your own.

Opens his essay by citing the specific publication he is responding to and then summarizing Pinker's central claim.

In his essay "Violence Vanquished," which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* (September 24, 2011), the Harvard Professor of Psychology, Steven Pinker, claims that the modern era is the most peaceful time in the history of the human species. He says that now more than ever before, we are less likely to die a violent death at the hands of another human being. He cites statistics that show how violence of all kinds—murder, war, genocide, and so on—have decreased across the board.

Pinker is aware that this fact seems not only unlikely but blatantly wrong, especially in light of the seemingly endless acts of violence that characterize so much of today's news. Yet, despite the horrors in Darfur, Syria, and Iraq and in virtually every major American city, Pinker is likely right in his general claim that violence is diminishing across the globe. It would be hard to argue with his statistics that prove that violence among human beings is at its lowest point in history.

Concedes that Pinker's statistics are probably correct, so will not argue with that aspect of the essay.

But there are still some major issues to consider when evaluating Pinker's position. For instance, what exactly

constitutes violence in this argument? It would first be helpful to analyze the author's definition. Throughout the piece, he discusses violence in terms of how likely one is to die at the hands of another human being. This is a convenient statistic, especially for an argument as numbers-driven as Pinker's, but violence extends well beyond just murder or warfare. Rape, assault, bullying—these are all ways in which human beings act violent toward one another, yet none of these phenomena are mentioned in his article.

Shows various ways we can define violence that Pinker ignores.

There are still other types of violence that permeate society. Most young boys have, at a certain point in their childhood, gotten into a wrestling match or a fist fight, often with someone very close to them—a brother, a cousin, a best friend. Now, this type of violence is not on par with murder, but it is certainly an aspect of our society that goes unmentioned by Pinker's analysis. Violence manifests itself in modern society in a variety of ways, many of which Pinker ignores and some of which are not extreme enough to even be on his radar.

In the latter half of the article, Pinker attempts to determine what exactly has caused the decline in violence he has described. He appeals first to modern governments, saying, "The most obvious of these pacifying forces has been the state, with its monopoly on the legitimate use of force." Here again, Pinker's point is not as simple as it appears. The state's ability to monopolize the use of force has absolutely helped quell vigilante justice and personal vendettas, but it has also created a potential for violence that is absolutely unprecedented.

Indeed, one could assume that at this moment, several of the world's major powers have the ability to launch a nuclear attack with weapons far more powerful than those used on Japan at the end of the Second World War, when a single plane dropping one atomic bomb over Hiroshima left over 100,000 human beings dead. The number of deaths that could result in a nuclear attack today is unthinkable. With modern weapons that absolutely dwarf the original atomic bomb, and with so many states having access to such weapons, Pinker's assertion that the state has brought about an alleviation of violence becomes less evident. He would be quick to point out that such an attack has not happened; it might be better to say that such an attack has not happened yet. As Robert Jervis says in his article "Pinker

Reinforces his point about state violence by citing supporting view.

the Prophet," "If we think we're playing Russian roulette, then the fact that we were lucky does not count quite so strongly for our living in a less violent time."[1]

Pinker also cites the global market as a source for this newfound peace. He points out how unlikely it is for a war to break out between the United States and China because "they make too much of our stuff, and we owe them too much money." But the fallacy of this point comes a paragraph earlier, when Pinker describes commerce as "a game in which everybody can win." This sentiment holds true when considering two nations like the United States and China—strong centralized governments, stable economies, freedom from internal conflict. This allows trade to occur between these two nations in a peaceful, mutually-beneficial manner.

But what about countries that aren't fortunate enough to be a world power? What about countries where the extraction of precious natural resources has resulted in some of the most gruesome violence of the twentieth century? One only need analyze the history of the diamond trade in Africa to realize the type of violence that can come as a direct result of commerce. Diamonds are a precious commodity, and any opportunity to make money in a place like Sierra Leone is likely to end in violence. Even more recently, the mining of coltan—a mineral used in most cell phones and laptops—has been the source for violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In these cases, commerce and trade have actually created violence—not alleviated it.

Supplies example of diamond-trade violence to counter Pinker's point about global commerce.

Pinker is constantly alluding to the Enlightenment as another source for what he calls "the most peaceable era in the existence of our species." It would be hard to argue that the Enlightenment didn't at least help people realize that killing one another may not be the best thing to do. That seems obvious now. But what about people who are raised in our enlightened society, taught about playing nice and the sanctity of life and the golden rule, yet still kill people? The list of school-shootings over the past twenty years is already terrifying and growing by the year. These acts are carried out by people who are presumably enlightened, products of our education system, who have had the

Confronts Pinker's point about the Enlightenment with counter-examples of today's violence.

[1]*The National Interest*, Issue 116, Nov./Dec. 2011, p. 57.

opportunity to learn how important and beautiful and sacred life is; yet the shootings still happen.

Pinker is quick to mention how "about 15% of people in prestate eras died violently," but fails to mention that the populations of these societies were savages by contemporary standards. Death happened at a much higher rate, but these people were wholly unable to comprehend the philosophical implications of the deaths they were causing. It was their way of life, and they didn't have the advanced knowledge to consider that life might be lived some other way. The same cannot be said about modern day murderers. If our society is truly as enlightened as Pinker likes to think it is—as we all like to think it is—then the fact that so many people still function outside of the collective societal reasoning, the fact that murders happen every day, should be far more shocking than the fact unenlightened savages killed one another at a higher rate than we do today.

Summarizes his objections to the way Pinker "measures" violence.

Pinker's assertion that violence is in consistent decline is both intriguing and inspiring, but is not as solid as it appears on the surface. To his credit, Pinker readily concedes that violence still has an enormous presence in human society. But the way in which he measures violence—human death caused by another human being—is not necessarily the full story on the matter. Furthermore, his desire to appeal to state power, global commerce, and the modern enlightened mind all have some important implications, as noted above, to which his article does not do justice.

The final claim that Pinker never addresses is an omission for which no one could blame him. One of the most frequent instances of violence over the past decade has been natural disasters—earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and so on. The amount of human life lost as a result is enormous, yes, but it wouldn't have anything to do with an assessment like Pinker's. Or would it? If one day, the world of science comes to discover that these patterns in extreme weather were caused by human beings, by the way modern society functions, is Pinker's argument changed at all? Are we considerably more violent if that is the case, even if it is unintentional? This is undoubtedly speculative, but if Pinker's project is to consider how violence works on the macro-level, it might not be a bad idea to at least consider the possibility that human beings kill one another in more ways than we realize.

Instead of concluding with a summary, he effectively introduces a new question about violence and human responsibility that Pinker never addresses.