

Dr. Steven Pinker is a Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. A widely celebrated academician and the author of ten books, including *The Blank Slate* (2002), *The Stuff of Thought* (2005), *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011), Dr. Pinker, in this interview with the journal's editor Swagat Baruah, discusses his recent bestselling book *Enlightenment Now* (2018) and his thoughts on analysing the world's problems.

In your book, *Enlightenment Now*, you have argued against the commonly accepted views on inequality – most importantly against the Gini coefficient, arguing that it is not the same as poverty or unfairness and that it isn't a fundamental dimension of human flourishing. But one of the major problems of inequality has been its effect on how power structures within a society work – how the power to effect change or make decisions is shared or rather remains with the very few in a democracy. How do you think inequality affects a democratic society and democratic decision-making?

The power of the wealthy is a real problem in democracies, but it is not the same as income inequality. In the absence of safeguards against the corruption of politics by money, rich donors can get the ear of politicians whether they earn 2 percent of national income or 8 percent of it. The most effective way to solve a problem is to solve that problem, not to worry about some other problem. To curtail the role of wealth in politics we need to focus on limitations on electoral campaign spending, transparency about who gives how much to which politicians, and other measures that deal with the problem directly, not the Gini index.

Your central thesis of the book is about the influence of the Enlightenment thinkers and how their ideas have shaped the world that is today, and how they need to be revisited in order to sustain such a world and to be constantly moving onwards and to reason out of a world of dogma and ideology. But even that calls for a universal ideology, based on certain tenets – such as giving maximum importance to science, progress and reason. How would you defend the Enlightenment thought as not being an ideology?

That isn't exactly right. Though I give a shout-out to the *philosophes* of the 18th century, to give credit to where it is due, the book is not a work of intellectual history, and it does not treat the Enlightenment thinkers as sages or prophets whose words we should return to and parse for deep meanings. The book is about Enlightenment *ideals*: reason, science, humanism, and progress. The ideal of reason cannot be an "ideology" because reason is what we all must use to decide whether something is an ideology or not—it is inescapable. Science is simply the application of reason to understand the physical world. Humanism, I argue, is the application of reason to ground morality—it's what everyone is forced to agree to when they set aside their parochial differences, which is a prerequisite to reasoning with people who have different backgrounds. And progress is an empirical hypothesis: whether it has taken place (with regard to a particular human value in a given region over a given period) has to be determined by looking at the data. And of course all of these propositions are themselves subject to disagreement and debate—with the proviso that one use reason to carry them out, of course.

**One of the central accusations against the 'New Atheists' has been their intolerance of any aspect of religion. The world is moving towards an age of 'no God' as you have noted, but on the other hand, crimes committed in the name of religion are still not a distant past – in fact it is a hardcore reality. How do you reconcile the right to practise one's religious faith with liberalism's duty to criticize anything that is against human rights?**

The accusation is wrong: there may be no finer encomium to the language and parables of the King James Bible than in Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. For my part, I acknowledge the beauty of religious iconography, legend, and ritual and the warmth of its communal gatherings; indeed, I occasionally partake of them myself. Most important, people have the right to say, do, and believe what they want, free of coercion, unless it directly harms someone else. But if a religious practice does harm someone, it should be prevented, just like any harmful action, and if a religious belief is dubious, it should be criticized, just like any dubious belief.

**It is interesting to see your philosophy of “you can’t reason that there’s no reason” in light of how truth is being perceived in the United States today and globally, in what is being called the ‘fake news’ crisis. Do you think that, we can, with such Cartesian objectivity, determine a thing such as truth? Did we ever arrive at truth, to have departed from it, into what is being called the ‘post-truth’ age?**

We can’t *determine* truth with certainty, but we can *seek* it, via science and philosophy, using reason to take measures that make our beliefs as true as possible—though we can never know for sure when we have succeeded. The fact that we have successful science, which allowed us to go to the moon and extinguish smallpox, and the fact that we have internally consistent and deductively powerful mathematics and logic, suggests that we can get closer to the truth than when we began. And the reason we can even use the term “fake news” implies that we can recognize some news as fake, which in turn means that we must have some standard of truth against which we’re comparing it. Otherwise all news would be equally real and equally fake.

**You have been highly critical of Friedrich Nietzsche and anyone who espouses his teachings. One of the central tenets of Nietzsche’s philosophy is the ‘will to power’ and how human beings are driven primarily by their ambition, their will to power. Is there any central driving force in human beings, which effects progress and evolution and if yes, what is it, according to you?**

People are not equipped with any single driving force, and certainly not with any force that propels us forward. We all have, to varying degrees, desires for safety, comfort, health, esteem, influence, family, knowledge, control, and other goods. With the right institutions and norms, some of these desires—particularly knowledge and sympathy—can be encouraged in ways that allow solutions to human problems to cumulate. These are the institutions and norms that I credit (partly for convenience) to the Enlightenment, and they are what makes progress possible.

**College campuses are the breeding space for debates, discussions and research and there have been certain movements in the West recently against the banning of**

**controversial people in colleges or controversial speech. What is your idea of freedom of speech – its limits and its standards?**

Freedom of speech must be the default, or else I could coerce anyone arguing against freedom of speech to shut up. It's essential as long as people fall short of omniscience and infallibility—which means forever. Of course within certain forums, like academia, journalism, and government, there must be standards of tolerance, coherence, evidence, and other criteria—to be free to speak doesn't mean one has a right to publish a rant in the *New York Times* or to proclaim a list of demands to Parliament. And even in the country with the staunchest legal commitment to free speech, the United States, there is a tradition of jurisprudence that has carved out circumscribed exceptions, such as extortion, bribery, slander, fraud, obscenity, treason, and incitement to imminent violent action. But there must also be safeguards on the safeguards, or else authorities could use flimsy pretexts of "treason" to muzzle opinions they don't like.