

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

**Category:** Psychology

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**Title:** Summary of Steven Pinker' (2018) *Enlightenment Now*:  
Preface and Introduction

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**Summary/ Abstract:** Steven Pinker, a renowned psychologist at Harvard, Published *Enlightenment Now*, to show us the world is progressing in humanism, rationalism and science, despite the prevalent doomsday view in the media. It is an antidote to the present-day negative view. Note that Pinker is a psychologist who starts from human intelligence.

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## Summary of Steven Pinker' (2018) *Enlightenment Now*: Preface and Introduction

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- xvii (1) In the preface, Steven Pinker (SP) quoted Trump's 2017 inauguration speech to represent the negative mood in American society.

by people with a dark vision of the current moment: "mothers and children trapped in poverty . . . an education system which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge . . . and the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs that have stolen too many lives." We are in an "outright war" that is "expanding and metastasizing." The blame for this nightmare may be placed on a "global power structure" that has eroded "the underlying spiritual and moral foundations of Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

- (2) Then he quoted Robert Merton's scientific virtues: CUDOS – communalism, Universalism, disinterestedness, organized, skepticism
- (3) He acknowledged sources from Our World in Data, Human Progresses, Gapminder, plus half a page of data

My gratitude goes as well to the other data scientists I pestered and to the institutions that collect and maintain their data: Karlyn Bowman, Daniel Cox (PRRI), Tamar Epner (Social Progress Index), Christopher Fariss, Chelsea Follett (*HumanProgress*), Andrew Gelman, Yair Ghitza, April Ingram (Science Heroes), Jill Janocha (Bureau of Labor Statistics), Gayle Kelch (US Fire Administration/FEMA), Alaina Kolosh (National Safety Council), Kalev Leetaru (Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone), Monty Marshall (Polity Project), Bruce Meyer, Branko Milanović (World Bank), Robert Muggah (Homicide Monitor), Pippa Norris (World Values Survey), Thomas Olshanski (US Fire Administration/FEMA), Amy Pearce (Science Heroes), Mark Perry, Therese Pettersson (Uppsala Conflict Data Program), Leandro Prados de la Escosura, Stephen Radelet, Auke Rijpma (OECD Clío Infra), Hannah Ritchie (*Our World in Data*), Seth Stephens-Davidowitz (Google Trends), James X. Sullivan, Sam Taub (Uppsala Conflict Data Program), Kyla Thomas, Jennifer Truman (Bureau of Justice Statistics), Jean Twenge, Bas van Leeuwen (OECD Clío Infra), Carlos Vilalta, Christian Welzel (World Values Survey), Justin Wolfers, and Billy Woodward (Science Heroes).

- p. 3-4 SP's enlightened / national answer to "why should I live?"  
A person's thinking ability, potential to flourish, sense of sympathy, humanism (sharing and understanding), sentient beings (feeling and consciousness) who are able to improve human condition and make progress.

- p.4 List of human progress
- Life expectancy
  - Food
  - IT / information
  - Water
  - Health and medicine
  - Safety
- p.5 Human reason against:
- Loyalty to tribe
  - Magical thinking
  - Blame others for misfortunes
  - Deference to authority
  - R: worship of strong leaders
- p. 6 SP: “Lay out a framework for understanding the human condition by modern science – who we are, where we came from, what our challenges are, and how we can meet them.”
- R: A bold and vigorous attempt to counteract negativism accompanied with post modernism of our time. SP is generally successful. More may follow on the dynamics of enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> century), its growth to rationalism and industrial revolution (19<sup>th</sup> century) by modernity and postmodernism (20<sup>th</sup> century). When we reassert enlightenment, we may think of the dialectics of reason and humanism. First we need to deepen our understanding, then we may need to convince the public and the world leaders. It could be again dystopia.
- Chapter 1
- p. 7 SP quoted Kant and then David Deutsch (DD)
- (1) Reason → against belief of miracles
  - (2) Science → to explain the world
- p. 9 SP quoted historian David Wootton on “an educational Englishman’s belief in 1600.”
- R: Some are magical beliefs (unicorn) but most are related to God’s power (geocentrism, explanation of nature, God designed nature for medicine) and some are folklores (ointment on dagger, alchemist gold)
- p. 10 When SP called it ignorance and supersitition, it merely showed “how mistaken our conventional wisdom could be”
- p. 10 (3) Universal human nature (UHN) → humanism → individual → sentient → sympathy → humanistic sensibility = humanitarian revolution (abolition of slavery and cruel punishment).
- (4) Progress

p. 12 Government is human invention and institution

In this way of thinking, government is not a divine fiat to reign, a synonym for "society," or an avatar of the national, religious, or racial soul. It is a human invention, tacitly agreed to in a social contract, designed to enhance the welfare of citizens by coordinating their behavior and discouraging selfish acts that may be tempting to every individual but leave everyone worse off. As the most famous product of the Enlight-

Among the powers of government is meting out punishment, and writers such as Montesquieu, Cesare Beccaria, and the American founders thought afresh about the government's license to harm its citizens.<sup>17</sup> Criminal punishment, they argued, is not a mandate to implement cosmic justice but part of an incentive structure that discourages antisocial acts without causing more suffering than it deters. The reason the pun-

p. 12 – 3 Peace

Rational Analysis of prosperity – Adam Smith

R: SP summarized 4 concepts in enlightenment: reason, science, UHN, Peace