

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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**Title:**

Human Nature, Doomsayers and Alienation
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**Summary/ Abstract:** In Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* (2018), there is a debate of enlightenment (Chapter 3) in which Pinker enumerates 9 challenges. Most important is the negativism of doomsayers and alienation. I find the whole issue related to the human nature.

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## The Debate of Enlightenment

### Summary of Chapter 3

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Steven Pinker enumerates 9 challenges:

p. 30      **(1) Romantic Movement – reason and emotion**

Quotes “the priest, the worrier, the poet”

↓                      ↓                      ↓  
 To know              To kill                      To create

**(2) Religious – believe in afterlife, moral good etc.**

(p.32 – religious is part of human nature)

Steven Pinker against faith

R: He has faith in enlightenment and reason.

p. 31      **(3) Nationalism – patriotic slogans**

Steven Pinker's idea of positive civic values and cultural pride:

Nationalism = share a territory = condommism association

**(4) Leftist – Marxist – equalization of race, class**

p. 32      **(5) Green movement**

“subordinates human interest to a transcendent entity, the ecosystem” (Steven Pinker proposed his humanistic environmentalism / economic modernism in Chapter 10)

**(6) Right-wing / ideology = secular religion**

R: Free enterprise and Self-interests

p. 33      **(7) Declinism – Domsayers**

Arthur Herman, *The idea of Decline in Western History*. Summary of good rhetoric:

One form of declinism bemoans our Promethean dabbling with technology.<sup>9</sup> By wresting fire from the gods, we have only given our species the means to end its own existence, if not by poisoning our environment then by loosing nuclear weapons, nanotechnology, cyberterror, bioterror, artificial intelligence, and other existential threats upon the world (chapter 19). And even if our technological civilization manages to escape outright annihilation, it is spiraling into a dystopia of violence and injustice: a brave new world of terrorism, drones, sweatshops, gangs, trafficking, refugees, inequality, cyberbullying, sexual assault, and hate crimes.

## (8) Alienation

made it too pleasant and safe. According to these critics, health, peace, and prosperity are bourgeois diversions from what truly matters in life. In serving up these philistine pleasures, technological capitalism has only damned people to an atomized, conformist, consumerist, materialist, other-directed, rootless, routinized, soul-deadening wilderness. In this absurd existence, people suffer from alienation, angst, anomie, apathy, bad faith, ennui, malaise, and nausea; they are “hollow men eating their naked lunches in the wasteland while waiting for Godot.”<sup>10</sup> (I will examine these claims in chapters 17 and 18.) In the twilight of a decadent, degenerate civilization, true liberation is to be found not in sterile rationality or effete humanism but in an authentic, heroic, holistic, organic, sacred, vital being-in-itself and will to power. In case you are wondering

R: It appears Steven Pinker mixed up alienation with “superman”

p. 34

## (9) Against scientism and urge for cultural depth

Snow vs Leavis

and . . . embarrassing vulgarity of style,” Leavis scoffed at a value system in which “‘standard of living’ is the ultimate criterion, its raising an ultimate aim.”<sup>15</sup> As an alternative, he suggested that “in coming to terms with great literature we discover what at bottom we really believe. What for—what ultimately for? What do men live by?—the questions work and tell at what I can only call a religious depth of thought and feeling.”

### R: My Criticism:

The above are all too familiar. My view is that there is much value / meaning in these challenges. In fact they are mostly related to human nature:

Romantic	Emotion (part of human nature)
Religion	Faith, human nature
Nationalism	Human nature
Leftist	Human ideal, social, collective
Green	Ecosystem
Doomsayers	Promethean fear (human nature)
Modernity	Alienation, decadence (sociality)
Scientism	Limit of science and reason (cognition)