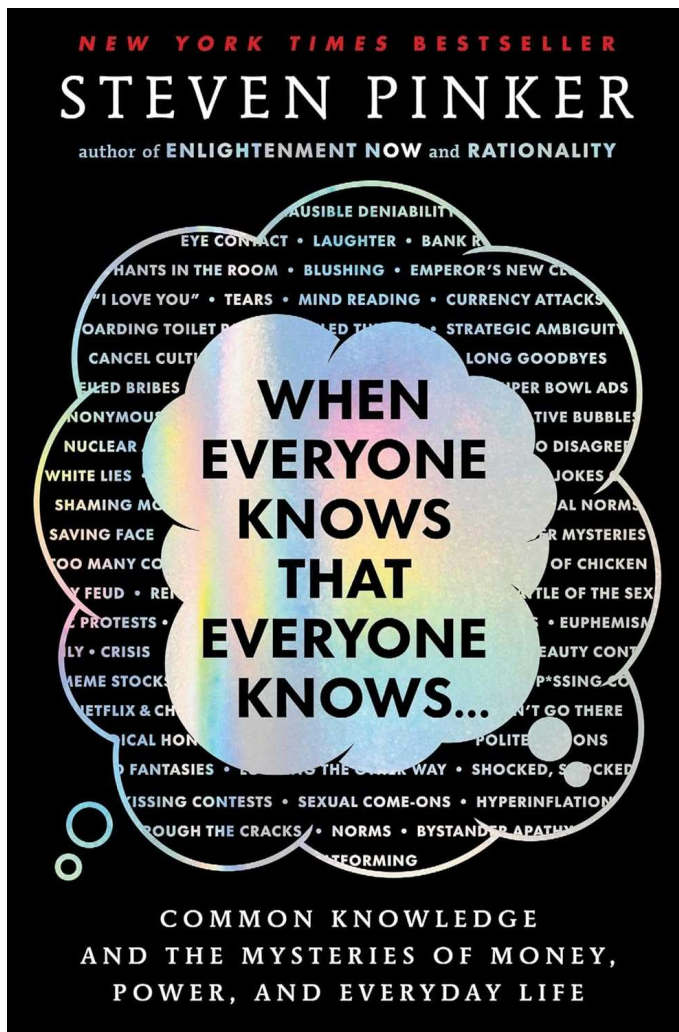


## ‘When Everyone Knows’ a lively exposition

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*“When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows: Common Knowledge and the Mysteries of Money, Power, and Everyday Life” by Steven Pinker. New York, NY: Scribner (an imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC), 2025, 384 pages, \$30.00.*



“As a cognitive scientist, I have spent my life thinking about how people think,” Steven Pinker explains near the beginning of “When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows: Common Knowledge and the Mysteries of Money, Power, and Everyday Life,” his latest New York Times bestseller. “So the ultimate subject of my fascination would have to be how people think about what other people think, and how they think about what other people think they think. As dizzying as this cognition may seem, we engage in it every day, at least tacitly, and in the limit this state of awareness has a technical name, common knowledge.”

“My goal in this book is to explain the obscure but momentous research on common knowledge, together with some ideas of my own, and show how the concept illuminates many enigmas of our public affairs and personal lives,” he continues a little further in the narrative. “The scholars I know who have worked on this concept – mathematicians, economists, philosophers, linguists, computer scientists – agree that it is a keystone in understanding the social world. But they have struggled to spread the news to a wide readership, and they often wonder how

human minds handle what seems like an impossibly abstruse state of knowing. This book, written from the vantage point of psychology and cognitive science, aims to bridge these gaps.”

A daunting task – but then again, most of Pinker’s career has been spent trying to unravel the innate mysteries of the human mind. Before making my way through this deceptively enlightening treatise, I had a somewhat divergent understanding of what is meant by “common knowledge.” I knew that it meant information we all accepted and took for granted on some level, but I did not attach the extraordinary significance to it that the author argues it deserves. In a nutshell, Pinker sees common knowledge as the primary mechanism for explaining all sorts of individual and collective phenomena: why some movies are hits and why other are duds, why some politicians win elections while others seem bound for perpetual disappointment, and why some countries set the bar for cultural and economic success when others seem to always be teetering at the edge of the abyss.

Like virtually everything Pinker has ever written, the manuscript is extensively researched, with 43 pages of source notes and references at the conclusion of the nine chapters that form the main text. The language is accessible – for the most part - to a general audience with minimal background and exposure to the underlying subject matter with which the author is intimately familiar. Although many of the concepts and ideas he articulates so fluently have their basis in rigorous scientific inquiry, he explains everything so well you feel you understand implicitly what he is trying to say. And at the end of the day, he’s describing elements of the human condition that most of us experience on a daily basis.

From my vantage point, one of the more fascinating discussions precipitated by Pinker occurs in “Reading the Mind of a Mind Reader,” the fourth chapter. Here, the author is dissecting the different ways common knowledge is identified and represented individually and collectively. One of those ways involves the notion of “self-evidence.” Consider the following:

“And this brings us to the third possibility for representing common knowledge, self-evidence. This is the idea that something is common knowledge if the event which reveals it is, by definition, known to one and all. That is, it’s in the very nature of the event that the event is known to have happened. When people perceive the event, what they’re perceiving includes the fact that other people are perceiving it – which entails that those people, too, are perceiving that the event is being perceived, and so on. The knowledge derivable from the event is common knowledge.”

“What counts as ‘self-evident’ is not always self-evident, so let’s consider some examples,” Pinker adds in the next paragraph. “One is an event that is public, not just in the sense that everyone sees it, but that everyone can see everyone else seeing it... Psychologists call this situation ‘joint attention,’ and have proposed that it allows children, starting around the age of one, to learn the linguistic and social skills of their culture.”

Sure, you may have to read some passages in “When Everyone Knows” more than once, but eventually the profound significance of what Pinker is saying hits you like a freight train. What you previously assumed could simply be taken for granted inevitably takes on deeper meaning and you literally begin to see (and interpret) the world around you in a different way.

The Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, Pinker is an elected member of the National Academy of Sciences, a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, and enshrined in Time Magazine’s 100 Most Influential People in the World Today. He is one of the most cited researchers in his field and has won numerous awards and honors for his work. His previous books (12 in total) include “The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language,” “How the Mind Works,” and “The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined,” and “Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters.” Full disclosure: He is one of my favorite authors.

To be fair, the implications of Pinker’s work go well beyond redefining our everyday experience. They also delve into the political realm most of us are submerged in during most of our waking hours. One such example comes from “Radical Honesty, Rational Hypocrisy,” the concluding chapter:

“Political leaders, being human, bond with each other over gossip, candid remarks, and off-color humor, and they get things done through hardheaded deliberations about how to push their agenda over obstacles and opposition. Yet when their plans are made common knowledge, commentators will announce they are shocked, shocked that politicians are so calculating and duplicitous. This has always been so: in 1792, Alexander Hamilton remarked of the Constitutional Convention:

‘Had the deliberations been open while going on, the clamours of faction would have prevented any satisfactory result. Had they been afterwards disclosed, much food would have been afforded to inflammatory declamation. Propositions made without due reflection, and perhaps abandoned by the proposers themselves, on more mature reflection, would have been handles for a profusion of ill-natured accusation.’

“The perils of making private deliberations common knowledge serves as a counterweight to the idea that all the dealings of democratic government must be public as they unfold in real time, and that leaking them is always heroic.”

Good point.

As Robert J. Aumann, the distinguished Nobel Laureate in Economics and Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem notes, “When Everyone Knows” is “a lively exposition of one of the most important and basic concepts in game theory, and the surprising ways it plays out in human affairs.”

I could not agree more. Highly recommended.

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