



## Better than We Think

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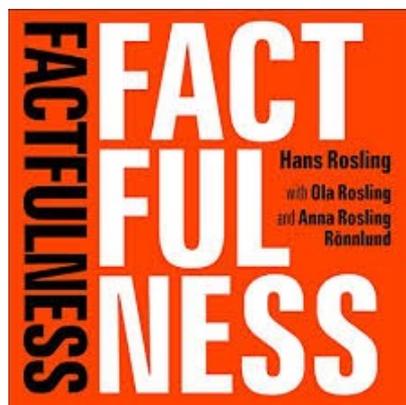
Bob Rees

**S**TEVEN Pinker has emphasised that the world is a much happier place than most of us give it credit for, and Hans Rosling attempts here to explain why we are so negative. He describes some of the common biases and impulses in our perceptive processes, what he calls ‘instincts’, that have led us to make misleading and mostly pessimistic assumptions about the state of the human race.

He points out that we tend to think of countries, cultures and religions as timeless and unchanging, even though in virtually every case, change is happening, if only very slowly. Over the years, slow change nevertheless adds up to big change, but because we never noticed it happening, we are blind to the ‘revolutionary transformations’ that have taken place in societies all around us. Our western societies are changing too, but most other countries are changing much faster.

Our natural tendency to categorise things into groups helps us to structure our thinking, but we are inclined to over-generalise by mentally segregating groups of people and countries that actually have a lot in common whilst stereotyping together others that are really very different. For example, we tend to think of Africa generally as smitten with problems of poverty, war and drought, though in fact Somalia, Ghana and Tunisia are each very different in these respects. The author warns us to look out for exceptional examples which are not typical of the group, and to avoid ascribing too much weight to claimed ‘majorities’ which may be 99%, but may also be only 51% and statistically insignificant.

What affects how people live is not so much their religion or nationality as their income. Our mental picture of the world is greatly simplified when we categorise peoples into just two groups, with a gap between them: the educated and the ignorant, rich and poor ... Us and Them. But using UN and World Bank statistics, Dr. Rosling demonstrates that this view is seriously outdated. The world has changed, and today most people are in the middle, right where we tend to think there is a gap. Admittedly about a billion people still exist in abject poverty on under \$2/day, but three billion have progressed to \$8/day, and two billion more now receive as much as \$32/day. Only a billion of us mostly westerners enjoy more than \$32/day, but the peloton has caught up and is set to overwhelm us. Our inclination to think geographically in terms of ‘the West and the rest’ is even more misleading because every level of wealth and poverty is to be found somewhere in most countries (though few are as poor as the poor in Afghanistan or the Central African Republic).



We naturally tend to pay special attention to the harmful and bad, and overlook the good. We dream of ‘the good old days’, but now we see only traffic congestion, pollution and drug addiction, while the news media tell us only bad news (simply because good news doesn’t sell), and the charities never miss a chance to stress how poor/oppressed/sick the people are in the ‘Third World’, to the extent that we are almost inclined to lose hope. And it’s true that many things are bad, but the statistics show that for the most part, in areas as diverse as poverty,

human rights, climate awareness and women’s education, they are rapidly getting better all the time, and there’s every reason for hope and even optimism. For example, in 2016, 4.2 million babies died in their first year. That’s terrible! But the previous year the number was 4.5 million, and back in 1950, it was 14.4 million. So actually, 4.2 million was a wonderful achievement, the lowest it had ever been.

The media know that quoting enormous numbers, like 4.2 million, without any qualifying reference, can grab headlines ... and charitable donations. Enormous lone numbers can be eye-catching but deceptive. In another example, Rosling tells us that at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2007, a European representative accusingly pointed out that India was emitting 1,211 million tonnes of greenhouse gases per annum, more even than Germany (837 million tonnes p.a.), to which the Indian representative politely retorted that India’s emissions *per person* were less than a quarter of those in Germany. The overwhelming scale of suffering, pollution or whatever, as presented in big unqualified numbers by the media and charities, distorts our view of the world.

Accordingly, the world seems much scarier than it really is, thanks also to our instinctive tendency to concentrate on the things that seem to pose a threat. This is the case even when the actual risk of exposure is low, such as being involved in a plane crash or a terrorist attack, because our attention is grabbed by all perceived risks, though only the objective risks pose real danger worth worrying about. This propensity for excessive caution that once kept our ancestors safe today keeps our journalists employed.

Another impulsive weakness is our tendency to assume that present trends will continue into the foreseeable future. We worry, for example, that the exploding human population will soon exceed the capacity of the planet to sustain it. In fact, the rate at which the human race has been growing is slowing as more and more people →

have escaped serious poverty, as contraceptives have become increasingly available, and as more women have received a decent education. And so, they have been producing ever smaller families. Contrary to our intuitions, very few trends continue forever.

Individually, we can only view the world from a single point of view, even though we know that nothing is ever as simple as it seems from a single aspect. In this respect, experts who are expert only in their own narrow field of specialisation are particularly susceptible to becoming fixated on one idea and one solution to a problem. The author advocates that we must open our minds to discrepant viewpoints, we should make more effort to try to see things through the eyes of those who disagree with us. For example, social campaigners tend to blame neo-liberalism and inequality for all our problems, while the neo-libs are blaming the welfare state and big government. Inevitably it's much more complicated: Dr Rosling illustrates this by pointing out that neither Cuba nor the USA has a perfect health system, the 'answer' surely lying somewhere in a complex mixture of both systems. But humanists must beware: campaigning ideologues can become over-obsessive when promoting their one-sided point of view.

Despite this realisation that most social problems are attributable to a complex interconnected network of causes, it is nevertheless mentally less stressful simply to look for a scapegoat when things go wrong. We especially love to blame lying journalists, greedy businessmen, self-seeking politicians and foreigners for all our troubles, even though we know that problems are rarely solved simply by finger pointing. This human tendency to scapegoating nevertheless provides fertile ground for racists, propagandists, populists and conspiracy theorists.

Another weakness is our inclination to treat most problems and decisions with greater urgency than they warrant. It's now or never – the moment will never come back. Sales people and activists over-exploit this tendency to urgency, though in daily life things are rarely all THAT urgent. But the constant alarmist media reports make us numb to real urgency, just as constant exaggeration undermines the credibility of well-founded data. So when something truly urgent crops up, such as a credible warning of imminent irreversible climate change, or the real threat of a global pandemic like Covid 19, many people cynically refuse to take it seriously at first, having been previously exposed to too many over-dramatised warnings of what turned out to be non-events. In this respect, it is worth recalling that the newsworthy First World War killed 21 million people, but the humdrum Spanish flu that followed immediately afterwards killed at least 50 million.

Unlike believers and atheists, humble agnostics have no beliefs that they may be called on to defend. Hans Rosling points out that humility similarly means that you are not pressured to have a view about everything, nor can you be called on to defend your views, whilst being curious means being open to new information and seek-

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ing it out. Humility and curiosity can help us to tackle our own instinctive pre-dispositions that, together with the media, tend to mislead us and give us such a jaundiced view of the world.

The World Bank, the United Nations Organisation and others

exist to provide the boring raw statistics (amongst other things). But we should not expect the charities or the news media to pass on these statistics in a non-dramatic non-selective way. They wouldn't raise funds, or sell newspapers or attract 'clicks' if they didn't over-emphasise and exaggerate the dramatic aspects of the world scene. They're only doing their jobs.

The book is thought-provoking and readable, though despite his advocacy of humility, Rosling rarely misses an opportunity to tell us how, in the most prestigious and exclusive venues, he made fools of our world leaders, business executives, bankers, and experts in various fields simply by exploiting their natural human tendencies to self-deception.

Yet it seems to me that the truly foundational instinct underlying all those described above is our tendency to find the raw statistics as published by the World Bank and UNO to be indigestible and boring. Instead, we allow ourselves to be influenced by the same statistics after they have been sifted, cooked, pre-digested and reinterpreted by those who are trying to manipulate and scare us. □

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#### HOPE

*Hope is like a harebell trembling from its birth,  
Love is like a rose the joy of all the earth;  
Faith is like a lily lifted high and white,  
Love is like a lovely rose the world's delight;  
Harebells and sweet lilies show a thornless growth,  
But the rose with all its thorns excels them both*

– Christina Rossetti

#### OPTIMISM

*I'm no reformer; for I see more light  
Than darkness in the world; mine eyes are quick  
To catch the first dim radiance of the dawn,  
And slow to note the cloud that threatens storm.  
The fragrance and the beauty of the rose  
Delight me so, slight thought I give its thorn;  
And the sweet music of the lark's clear song  
Stays longer with me than the night hawk's cry.  
And e'en in this great throe of pain called Life,  
I find a rapture linked with each despair,  
Well worth the price of Anguish. I detect  
More good than evil in humanity.  
Love lights more fires than hate extinguishes,  
And men grow better as the world grows old.*

– Ella Wheeler Wilcox