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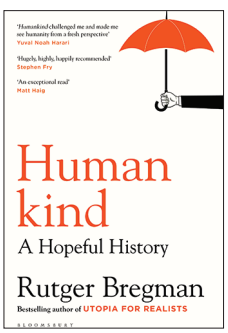
Book

Humankind neither nasty nor brutish



Humankind: A Hopeful History
Rutger Bregman
Bloomsbury, 2020
pp 496, £18·00
ISBN 9781408898932

On a cold February day in Amsterdam in 2016, an Alfa Romeo stopped by a canal side. A woman got out of the driver seat and went to get her toddler out of the car. To her horror, she realised the car was still moving and jumped back into the driver seat. She was too late to apply the brake and the car glided into the canal. Ruben, a jeweller who heard her screams and saw it happen, grabbed a hammer, dashed from his shop, and plunged into the icy water. Meanwhile, three other men joined him in the water. As one of them, Reinier, was about to jump in, another bystander handed him a brick. It proved crucial. With the brick Reinier smashed the rear window, and the woman passed her toddler to Ruben and to safety. The four men got the woman out of the car, a few seconds before the car vanished into the waters of the canal. People on the canal side were ready with blankets and towels. The whole rescue operation was completed in a couple of minutes. None of the four men knew each other or exchanged a word throughout.

This heart-warming story of bystanders selflessly getting involved and cooperating to save two lives is in stark contrast to a more famous bystander story, that of Kitty Genovese in Kew Gardens, New York City, in 1964. When Kitty was attacked in the street in the early hours of the morning, 38 people heard her screams. After 30 minutes and three separate knife attacks by the murderer, a neighbour called the police. But it was too late and Genovese died of the knife wounds, alone and neglected. The inaction of bystanders went into the history books as testament to the lack of care for other people and the desire not to get involved.

Rutger Bregman, in *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, tells both of these stories. His point is not that Amsterdamers are more caring than New Yorkers: it is to dispute the rather dismal picture of human nature portrayed by the so-called bystander phenomenon. The thesis of Bregman's engaging book is that we have altogether too negative a view of human nature. His prime target is the veneer theory of civilisation. The theory suggests that our civilised way of life is a thin veneer; remove it and what is revealed is a picture of human life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, to quote philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In Hobbes's account it was the state, Leviathan, that stopped the war of all against all.

> **"Bregman's vision is of more caring and cooperative societies that draw on and encourage the best in human nature...His thesis could not be more timely."**

As a rhetorical device, Bregman takes Jean-Jacques Rousseau's more hopeful account of humanity in a state of nature. For Rousseau the problem is not what is hidden by the veneer—human nature is fine—it is civilisation itself. Bregman sets it up as a Hobbes versus Rousseau tussle. Were we planning to return to becoming hunter–gatherers, it would be a most important argument. But we aren't and, as Steven Pinker documented in *Enlightenment Now*, since the civilisation that came with Enlightenment so much has improved, albeit with some major stutters along the way. That said, Bregman makes the case that our view of human nature matters to how we act as societies. His concern is with the nocebo effect. If we expect the worst of our fellow humans, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Rather than see humankind's inherent nastiness, Bregman is keen to show our inherent goodness. It is not difficult to give an account of why the health of individuals and populations could be damaged if our basic nature were predominantly selfish, greedy, hostile, and non-cooperative as compared to altruistic, generous, affiliative, and cooperative. It is clear, though, that we are not all nasty or all good, but some of both. How much of each, and under what circumstances, forms a good deal of the evidence reviewed by Bregman.

To return, then, to the bystander effect, it turns out there has been a meta-analysis of bystander incidents. The rescue in Amsterdam is the rule: Bregman writes that in 90% of cases people help each other out. And he describes how the events related to the death of Genovese in New York were not uniquely awful, just misreported. There were fewer than 38 bystanders who heard the cries and ignored them; and there was one woman who did rush to help despite the apparent danger. Kitty died cradled in her neighbour's arms.

Bregman has famous studies of social psychology in his sights. World War 2, and the Holocaust in particular, was a challenge to any optimistic view of human nature. After the war and these horrific events, there was an interest in the extent to which people were capable of such barbarity. There was, in the decades after World War 2, a ready audience for studies that purported to show that, given the right conditions, any of us could become Nazi torturers or prison guards. Bregman confesses that he is on a mission to discredit these studies, and marshalls evidence in support of his quest. He has little difficulty dismissing the Stanford Prison Experiment as flawed. This study purported to show that when volunteers were given charge of so-called prisoners they behaved with

cruelty. They didn't. More difficult for Bregman to discredit is the Milgram torture experiment. Under the kind of sham conditions in which such social psychology experiments excel, volunteers were encouraged to give electric shocks to people who apparently failed a memory test. The shocks were not real, of course, but the volunteers were encouraged to believe that they were and to up the dosage as the experiment continued. Remarkably, of the study participants, 65% continued up to the lethal 450 volts. Volunteers were, apparently, willing to kill someone they didn't know for the crime of failing a memory test. Bregman's digging into subsequent critiques of the experiment revealed that it was not quite as bad as it seemed: a substantial proportion of the "torturers" had figured out that it was not real. Several more protested that it was wrong. Those who did continue were convinced by the researchers that what they were doing was for the greater good. Bregman, with something of a leap, goes from there to the Holocaust and the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Bregman is horrified by the Holocaust, as anyone who believes in the goodness of humankind must be. He suggests that people will indeed do nasty things on a mass scale if they are convinced that it is for the greater good. It was not inherent nastiness that led to the Holocaust, Bregman suggests, but years of indoctrination.

At a more micro scale, selfishness and greed are at the heart of classic models of economics. Society works by everyone pursuing their self-interest and, as if guided by an invisible hand, it achieves optimal outcomes. This idea can be traced back to the Scottish Enlightenment and Adam Smith, but it has remarkable persistence, and underlies free-market economics in modern politics. There are several problems with this wonderfully creative theory of society. Building on Bregman, it is worth highlighting three.

Gustavo Basso/NurPhoto/Getty Images

First, self-interest is a degraded and limited way to describe the behaviour of health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: doctors, nurses, and other health-care workers are selflessly putting their lives at risk in the service of others. Greed, self-interest, lack of care for others? Hardly. To respond, that altruism is an illusion because deep down these individuals were doing it to serve their own feelings of self-worth—"cynicism is a theory of everything" cautions Bregman—explains nothing. If all behaviour is motivated by self-love, there still has to be a meaningful distinction between behaviour that is in the service of others and behaviour that only furthers one's own interest. We could call the first altruistic and generous, and the second greedy and selfish. The altruistic behaviour certainly does not serve the economic self-interest of the individual health worker.

Second, pursuing a model of unbridled free markets brings in its train problems of inequality, poverty, and externalities such as threats to the environment and our planet. One only has to look at a health-care system that is notionally based on free market principles but fails to deliver optimal health care to the whole population. There are not too many ideologues currently claiming that the way to ensure health-care provision in a pandemic is to leave it to the market.

Third, Adam Smith, the brilliant originator of this free-market model, did not believe it gave an adequate account of individuals' motivations. Smith wrote in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."

Bregman ranges widely from economics to education and health care. He is especially scathing about theories of crime and punishment that depend on a hopeless view of human nature. Broken windows' theory, which argued that law enforcement should come down hard on minor infringements to avoid major crimes, is, in Bregman's view, without evidence or virtue. Bregman's vision is of more caring and cooperative societies that draw on and encourage the best in human nature. Pessimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy. His thesis could not be more timely. Again, his reference to Adam Smith is highly relevant: "No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."

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Further reading

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