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Rutger Bregman. *Humankind: A Hopeful History*

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**Rutger Bregman. *Humankind: A Hopeful History*.
New York: Little Brown and Company, 2019.**

Reviewed by John Berteaux

Do crises bring out the best or the worst in people? Are humans inclined to be evil, or are they more likely to be good, to do the right thing? Is civilization simply a thin veneer that is easily scratched away? From Church Father St. Augustine (354-430) to French theologian, pastor, and reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), we are depicted, if not as totally depraved and evil, at least, as the bearers of original sin. While perusing Rutger Bregman's hopeful history, I happened upon a newspaper article announcing an exhibition of drawings and prints of Francisco Goya (1746-1828), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. About the exhibit, *Goya: The Dreams, the Visions, the Nightmares*, journalist Jason Farago of the New York Times writes:

We've made Goya into a useful archetype: the truth-telling liberal in an autocratic Spain, defender of reason, artist of the Enlightenment. Indeed, he was those things. Yet Goya saw, and depicted with unrivaled vision, that error or evil can never be purged entirely, not from your society, nor from your soul. A world of perfect justice will always be a mirage. Tyrants, idiots, swindlers, conspiracy theorists: They will always be with us. And deep inside the chambers of our hearts — untouched by our rational skepticism, our faith in our own righteousness — remains an eliminable darkness.¹



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes Plate 36: The Disasters of War

¹ Jason Farago, "Goya: The Dreams, the Visions, the Nightmares." [New York Times](#) 12 February 2021, sec. C1.

In light of this, Farago urges us to see Goya as advising that ambiguity is the defining characteristic of the human heart.

Human Kind: A Hopeful History is a clearly written, extensive account that not only explores the works of philosophers, such as Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant, but also turns to scientists and political theorists like Darwin and Machiavelli, and economists like John Maynard Keynes. Rutger Bergman delves into the mystery of Easter Island, and the work of social theorists such as Philip Zimbardo (Stanford Prison Experiment), and Stanley Milgram (Shock Experiment). He probes the recollections of witnesses and reviews the newspapers reports about the actions of those who, on March 27, 1964, stood by and witnessed the stabbing death of Catherine Genovese, on a street in New York City. And not unlike Goya, Rutger Bergman finds that humankind is more complex than the schemes of past or present theorists suggest.

Of course, Bergman begins his survey by critiquing a book that suggests civilization is little more than just a thin veneer. Under that thin veneer, human beings are mean, uncaring, and even cruel. The book has sold millions of copies, and almost every schoolkid has read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Whereas past and present wisdom provide ample evidence of a highly deterministic, pessimistic, and depraved view of humankind, readers of Bergman's book will discover early on that he takes Golding's thesis to task. He counters the negative views of human nature by offering a range of scientific studies and real-world examples, which suggest humans are not all that bad. Moreover, he complains, one reason we are so cynical about human nature is that popular media has done little to dissuade us from believing that we are by nature "selfish, tribal, gullible, convenience seekers."

Bergman not only locates scientific evidence suggesting that children left to their own devices will not necessarily sink to savagery, but he locates a real-world example that contradicts Golding's thesis. The counterexample tells the story of a group of school boys from the Pacific island nation of Tonga, ranging in age from 13 to 16. The boys seek adventure and thus take a small boat and sail off into the Pacific. Days later they find themselves marooned on the south sea island 'Ata, where they remained for a year. Bergman points out that despite the fact that the experience of these boys was very different from Golding's teens, it is Golding's negative view of human nature that continues to prevail.

Bergman, however, reminds us that right alongside the negative, there have been positive depictions of humankind. Take, for example, Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) depiction of man in the *Leviathan*. Hobbes tells us that humans are machines that only act in their own self-interest. They have no innate moral compass, no awareness of moral law — selling short humankind's capacity for empathy and/or altruism. Hobbes asks us to imagine what life would be like were it not for an all-powerful state.

In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1788) in *The Social Contract* claims that man is naturally good and that it is on account of the “curse of civilization” that humans become wicked.

Bergman offers a wide range of examples to support the claim that people are not as depraved as artists, church fathers, philosophers, social theorists, and popular media suggest. Ultimately, he labors to present evidence pointing out the importance of a more nuanced view of human nature. Indeed, he insists that parochial views of human nature are misleading while demonstrating that how we characterize humankind has significant application. For instance, while Hobbes, based on his vision of human nature, saw life in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” Rousseau argues that back when humans existed in a state of nature, we were still caring, compassionate beings. This debate has important consequences for the whole of American and French political life. Hobbes’ analysis portends the American model of an isolated individual surviving in a capitalist state, whereas Rousseau’s conception, by subordinating the individual to the needs of society or the collective, stanchions the French socialist political model.

Bergman says, “I know of no other debate with stakes as high, or ramifications as far-reaching. Harsher punishments versus better social services, art school versus reform school, top-down management versus empowered teams, old-fashioned breadwinners versus baby-toting dads.” He insists it is not simply that a nuanced view of human nature is more realistic. To be more precise, he is convinced that, in addition, we have the power to make a hopeful view of human nature a reality if we actually started to believe it.