More praise for *Humankind*

'An extraordinarily powerful declaration of faith in the innate goodness and natural decency of human beings. Never dewy-eyed, wistful or naive, Rutger Bregman makes a wholly robust and convincing case for believing – despite so much apparent evidence to the contrary – that we are not the savage, irredeemably greedy, violent and rapacious species we can be led into thinking ourselves to be' Stephen Fry

'Every revolution in human affairs – and we're in one right now! – comes in tandem with a new understanding of what we mean by the word "human". Rutger Bregman has succeeded in reawakening that conversation by articulating a kinder view of humanity (with better science behind it). This book gives us some real hope for the future' Brian Eno

'*Humankind* provides the philosophical and historical backbone to give us the confidence to collaborate, be kind and trust each other to build a better society' Mariana Mazzucato, author of *The Value of Everything*

'Some books challenge our ideas. But *Humankind* challenges the very premises on which those ideas are based. Its bold, sweeping argument will make you rethink what you believe about society, democracy and human nature itself. In a sea of cynicism, this book is the sturdy, unsinkable lifeboat the world needs' Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive*

'This is a wonderful and uplifting book. I not only want all my friends and relations to read it, but everyone else as well. It is an essential part of the campaign for a better world' Richard Wilkinson, author of *The Spirit Level*

'A fantastic read … Good fun, fresh and a page turner' James Rebanks, author of *The Shepherd's Life*

'This stunning book will change how you see the world and

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‘Man will become better when you show him what he is like.’

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904)

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PROLOGUE

On the eve of the Second World War, the British Army Command found itself facing an existential threat. London was in grave danger. The city, according to a certain Winston Churchill, formed 'the greatest target in the world, a kind of tremendous fat cow, a valuable fat cow tied up to attract the beasts of prey'.[1]

The beast of prey was, of course, Adolf Hitler and his war machine. If the British population broke under the terror of his bombers, it would spell the end of the nation. 'Traffic will cease, the homeless will shriek for help, the city will be in pandemonium,' feared one British general.[2] Millions of civilians would succumb to the strain, and the army wouldn't even get around to fighting because it would have its hands full with the hysterical masses. Churchill predicted that at least three to four million Londoners would flee the city.

Anyone wanting to read up on all the evils to be unleashed needed only one book: *Psychologie des foules* – 'The Psychology of the Masses' – by one of the most influential scholars of his day, the Frenchman Gustave Le Bon. Hitler read the book cover to cover. So did Mussolini, Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt.

Le Bon's book gives a play by play of how people respond to crisis. Almost instantaneously, he writes, 'man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilization'.[3] Panic and violence erupt, and we humans reveal our true nature.

On 19 October 1939, Hitler briefed his generals on the German plan of attack. 'The ruthless employment of the *Luftwaffe* against the heart of the British will-to-resist,' he said, 'can and will follow at the given moment.'[4]

In Britain, everyone felt the clock ticking. A last-ditch plan to dig a network of underground shelters in London was considered, but ultimately scrapped over concerns that the populace, paralysed by fear, would never re-emerge. At the last

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moment, a few psychiatric field hospitals were thrown up outside the city to tend to the first wave of victims.

And then it began.

On 7 September 1940, 348 German bomber planes crossed the Channel. The fine weather had drawn many Londoners outdoors, so when the sirens sounded at 4:43 p.m. all eyes went to the sky.

That September day would go down in history as Black Saturday, and what followed as 'the Blitz'. Over the next nine months, more than 80,000 bombs would be dropped on London alone. Entire neighbourhoods were wiped out. A million buildings in the capital were damaged or destroyed, and more than 40,000 people in the UK lost their lives.

So how did the British react? What happened when the country was bombed for months on end? Did people get hysterical? Did they behave like brutes?

Let me start with the eyewitness account of a Canadian psychiatrist.

In October 1940, Dr John MacCurdy drove through south-east London to visit a poor neighbourhood that had been particularly hard hit. All that remained was a patchwork of craters and crumbling buildings. If there was one place sure to be in the grip of pandemonium, this was it.

So what did the doctor find, moments after an air raid alarm? 'Small boys continued to play all over the pavements, shoppers went on haggling, a policeman directed traffic in majestic boredom and the bicyclists defied death and the traffic laws. No one, so far as I could see, even looked into the sky.'[5]

In fact, if there's one thing that all accounts of the Blitz have in common it's their description of the strange serenity that settled over London in those months. An American journalist interviewing a British couple in their kitchen noted how they sipped tea even as the windows rattled in their frames. Weren't they afraid?, the journalist wanted to know. 'Oh no,' was the answer. 'If we were, what good would it do us?'[6]

Evidently, Hitler had forgotten to account for one thing: the quintessential British character. The stiff upper lip. The wry

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humour, as expressed by shop owners who posted signs in front of their wrecked premises announcing: MORE OPEN THAN USUAL. Or the pub proprietor who in the midst of devastation advertised: OUR WINDOWS ARE GONE, BUT OUR SPIRITS ARE EXCELLENT. COME IN AND TRY THEM.[7]

The British endured the German air raids much as they would a delayed train. Irritating, to be sure, but tolerable on the whole. Train services, as it happens, also continued during the Blitz, and Hitler's tactics scarcely left a dent in the domestic economy. More detrimental to the British war machine was Easter Monday in April 1941, when everybody had the day off.[8]

Within weeks after the Germans launched their bombing campaign, updates were being reported much like the weather: 'Very blitzy tonight.'[9] According to an American observer, 'the English get bored so much more quickly than they get anything else, and nobody is taking cover much any longer'.[10]

And the mental devastation, then? What about the millions of traumatised victims the experts had warned about? Oddly enough, they were nowhere to be found. To be sure, there was sadness and fury; there was terrible grief at the loved ones lost. But the psychiatric wards remained empty. Not only that, public mental health actually improved. Alcoholism tailed off. There were fewer suicides than in peacetime. After the war ended, many British would yearn for the days of the Blitz, when everybody helped each other out and no one cared about your politics, or whether you were rich or poor.[11]

'British society became in many ways strengthened by the Blitz,' a British historian later wrote. 'The effect on Hitler was disillusioning.'[12]

When put to the test, the theories set forth by celebrated crowd psychologist Gustave Le Bon could hardly have been further off the mark. Crisis brought out not the worst, but the *best* in people. If anything, the British moved up a few rungs on the ladder of civilisation. 'The courage, humor, and kindliness of ordinary people,' an American journalist confided in her diary, 'continue to be astonishing under conditions that possess many of the features of a nightmare.'[13]

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These unexpected impacts of the German bombings sparked a debate on strategy in Britain. As the Royal Air Force prepared to deploy its own fleet of bombers against the enemy, the question was how to do so most effectively.

Curiously, given the evidence, the country's military experts still espoused the idea that a nation's morale could be broken. By bombs. True, it hadn't worked on the British, the reasoning went, but they were a special case. No other people on the planet could match their levelheadedness and fortitude. Certainly not the Germans, whose fundamental 'lack of moral fibre' meant they would 'not stand a quarter of the bombing' the British endured.[14]

Among those who endorsed this view was Churchill's close friend Frederick Lindemann, also known as Lord Cherwell. A rare photograph of him shows a tall man with a cane, wearing a bowler hat and an icy expression.[15] In the fierce debate over air strategy, Lindemann remained adamant: bombing *works*. Like Gustave Le Bon, he took a dim view of the masses, writing them off as cowardly and easily panicked.

To prove his point, Lindemann dispatched a team of psychiatrists to Birmingham and Hull, two cities where the German bombings had taken an especially heavy toll. They interviewed hundreds of men, women and children who had lost their homes during the Blitz, inquiring about the smallest details – 'down to the number of pints drunk and aspirins bought in the chemists'.[16]

The team reported back to Lindemann a few months later. The conclusion, printed in large letters on the title page, was this:

> THERE IS NO EVIDENCE OF BREAKDOWN OF MORALE.[17]

So what did Frederick Lindemann do with this unequivocal finding? He ignored it. Lindemann had already decided that strategic bombing was a sure bet, and mere facts were not about to change his mind.

And so the memo he sent to Churchill said something altogether different:

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> Investigation seems to show that having one's house demolished is most dangerous to morale. People seem to mind it more than having their friends or even relatives killed. At Hull, signs of strain were evident though only one-tenth of the homes were demolished. On the above figures, we can do as much harm to each of the 58 principal German towns. There seems little doubt that this would break the spirit of the German people.[18]

Thus ended the debate over the efficacy of bombing. The whole episode had, as one historian later described it, the 'perceptible smell of a witch hunt'.[19] Conscientious scientists who opposed the tactic of targeting German civilians were denounced as cowards, even traitors.

The bomb-mongers, meanwhile, felt the enemy needed to be dealt an even harsher blow. Churchill gave the signal and all hell broke loose over Germany. When the bombing finally ended, the casualties numbered ten times higher than after the Blitz. On one night in Dresden, more men, women and children were killed than in London during the whole war. More than half of Germany's towns and cities were destroyed. The country had become one big heap of smouldering rubble.

All the while, only a small contingent of the Allied air force was actually striking strategic targets such as factories and bridges. Right up through the final months, Churchill maintained that the surest way to win the war was by dropping bombs on civilians to break national morale. In January 1944, a Royal Air Force memo gratifyingly affirmed this view: 'The more we bomb, the more satisfactory the effect.'

The prime minister underlined these words using his famous red pen.[20]

So did the bombings have the intended effect?

Let me again start with an eyewitness account from a respected psychiatrist. Between May and July 1945, Dr Friedrich Panse interviewed almost a hundred Germans whose homes had been destroyed. 'Afterward,' said one, 'I was really full of vim and lit up a cigar.' The general mood following a raid, said another, was euphoric, 'like after a war that has been won.'[21]

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There was no sign of mass hysteria. On the contrary, in places that had just been hit, inhabitants felt relief. ‘Neighbours were wonderfully helpful,’ Panse recorded. ‘Considering the severity and duration of the mental strain, the general attitude was remarkably steady and restrained.’[22]

Reports by the *Sicherheitsdienst*, which kept close tabs on the German population, convey a similar picture. After the raids, people helped each other out. They pulled victims from the rubble, they extinguished fires. Members of the Hitler Youth rushed around tending to the homeless and the injured. A grocer jokingly hung up a sign in front of his shop: DISASTER BUTTER SOLD HERE![23]

(Okay, the British humour was better.)

Shortly after the German surrender in May 1945, a team of Allied economists visited the defeated nation, tasked by the US Department of Defense to study the effects of the bombing. Most of all, the Americans wanted to know if this tactic was a good way to win wars.

The scientists’ findings were stark: the civilian bombings had been a fiasco. In fact, they appeared to have strengthened the German wartime economy, thereby prolonging the war. Between 1940 and 1944, they found that German tank production had multiplied by a factor of nine, and of fighter jets by a factor of *fourteen*.

A team of British economists reached the same conclusion.[24] In the twenty-one devastated towns and cities they investigated, production had increased faster than in a control group of fourteen cities that had not been bombed. ‘We were beginning to see,’ confessed one of the American economists, ‘that we were encountering one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest miscalculation of the war.’[25]

What fascinates me most about this whole sorry affair is that the main actors all fell into the same trap.

Hitler and Churchill, Roosevelt and Lindemann – all of them signed on to psychologist Gustave Le Bon’s claim that our state of civilisation is no more than skin deep. They were certain that air raids would blow this fragile covering to bits. But the more

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they bombed, the *thicker* it got. Seems it wasn't a thin membrane at all, but a callus.

Military experts, unfortunately, were slow to catch on. Twenty-five years later, US forces would drop three times as much firepower on Vietnam as they dropped in the entire Second World War.[26] This time it failed on an even grander scale. Even when the evidence is right in front of us, somehow we still manage to deny it. To this day, many remain convinced that the resilience the British people showed during the Blitz can be chalked up to a quality that is singularly British.

But it's not singularly British. It's universally human.

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1

A New Realism

1

This is a book about a radical idea.

An idea that's long been known to make rulers nervous. An idea denied by religions and ideologies, ignored by the news media and erased from the annals of world history.

At the same time, it's an idea that's legitimised by virtually every branch of science. One that's corroborated by evolution and confirmed by everyday life. An idea so intrinsic to human nature that it goes unnoticed and gets overlooked.

If only we had the courage to take it more seriously, it's an idea that might just start a revolution. Turn society on its head. Because once you grasp what it really means, it's nothing less than a mind-bending drug that ensures you'll never look at the world the same again

So what is this radical idea?

That most people, deep down, are pretty decent.

I don't know anyone who explains this idea better than Tom Postmes, professor of social psychology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. For years, he's been asking students the same question.

> Imagine an airplane makes an emergency landing and breaks into three parts. As the cabin fills with smoke, everybody inside realises: We've got to get out of here. What happens?

- On Planet A, the passengers turn to their neighbours to ask if they're okay. Those needing assistance are helped out of the plane first. People are willing to give their lives, even for perfect strangers.

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- On Planet B, everyone's left to fend for themselves. Panic breaks out. There's lots of pushing and shoving. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities get trampled underfoot.

  Now the question: Which planet do we live on?

'I would estimate about 97 per cent of people think we live on Planet B,' says Professor Postmes. 'The truth is, in almost every case, we live on Planet A.'[1]

Doesn't matter who you ask. Left wing or right, rich or poor, uneducated or well read – all make the same error of judgement. 'They don't know. Not freshman or juniors or grad students, not professionals in most cases, not even emergency responders,' Postmes laments. 'And it's not for a lack of research. We've had this information available to us since World War II.'

Even history's most momentous disasters have played out on Planet A. Take the sinking of the *Titanic*. If you saw the movie, you probably think everybody was blinded by panic (except the string quartet). In fact, the evacuation was quite orderly. One eyewitness recalled that 'there was no indication of panic or hysteria, no cries of fear, and no running to and fro'.[2]

Or take the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks. As the Twin Towers burned, thousands of people descended the stairs calmly, even though they knew their lives were in danger. They stepped aside for firefighters and the injured. 'And people would actually say: "No, no, you first,"' one survivor later reported. 'I couldn't believe it, that at this point people would actually say "No, no, please take my place." It was uncanny.'[3]

There is a persistent myth that by their very nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic. It's what Dutch biologist Frans de Waal likes to call *veneer theory*: the notion that civilisation is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the merest provocation.[4] In actuality, the opposite is true. It's when crisis hits – when the bombs fall or the floodwaters rise – that we humans become our best selves.

On 29 August 2005, Hurricane Katrina tore over New Orleans. The levees and flood walls that were supposed to protect the

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city failed. In the wake of the storm, 80 per cent of area homes flooded and at least 1,836 people lost their lives. It was one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history.

That whole week newspapers were filled with accounts of rapes and shootings across New Orleans. There were terrifying reports of roving gangs, lootings and of a sniper taking aim at rescue helicopters. Inside the Superdome, which served as the city's largest storm shelter, some 25,000 people were packed in together, with no electricity and no water. Two infants' throats had been slit, journalists reported, and a seven-year-old had been raped and murdered.[5]

The chief of police said the city was slipping into anarchy, and the governor of Louisiana feared the same. 'What angers me the most,' she said, 'is that disasters like this often bring out the worst in people.'[6]

This conclusion went viral. In the British newspaper the *Guardian*, acclaimed historian Timothy Garton Ash articulated what so many were thinking: 'Remove the elementary staples of organised, civilised life – food, shelter, drinkable water, minimal personal security – and we go back within hours to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all. […] A few become temporary angels, most revert to being apes.'

There it was again, in all its glory: veneer theory. New Orleans, according to Garton Ash, had opened a small hole in 'the thin crust we lay across the seething magma of nature, including human nature'.[7]

It wasn't until months later, when the journalists cleared out, the floodwaters drained away and the columnists moved on to their next opinion, that researchers uncovered what had really happened in New Orleans.

What sounded like gunfire had actually been a popping relief valve on a gas tank. In the Superdome, six people had died: four of natural causes, one from an overdose and one by suicide. The police chief was forced to concede that he couldn't point to a single officially reported rape or murder. True, there had been looting, but mostly by groups that had teamed up to survive, in some cases even banding with police.[8]

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Researchers from the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware concluded that 'the overwhelming majority of the emergent activity was prosocial in nature'.[9] A veritable armada of boats from as far away as Texas came to save people from the rising waters. Hundreds of civilians formed rescue squads, like the self-styled Robin Hood Looters – a group of eleven friends who went around looking for food, clothing and medicine and then handing it out to those in need.[10]

Katrina, in short, didn't see New Orleans overrun with self-interest and anarchy. Rather, the city was inundated with courage and charity.

The hurricane confirmed the science on how human beings respond to disasters. Contrary to what we normally see in the movies, the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware has established that in nearly seven hundred field studies since 1963, there's never total mayhem. It's never every man for himself. Crime – murder, burglary, rape – usually drops. People don't go into shock, they stay calm and spring into action. 'Whatever the extent of the looting,' a disaster researcher points out, 'it always pales in significance to the widespread altruism that leads to free and massive giving and sharing of goods and services.'[11]

Catastrophes bring out the best in people. I know of no other sociological finding that's backed by so much solid evidence that's so blithely ignored. The picture we're fed by the media is consistently the opposite of what happens when disaster strikes.

Meanwhile, back in New Orleans, all those persistent rumours were costing lives.

Unwilling to venture into the city unprotected, emergency responders were slow to mobilise. The National Guard was called in, and at the height of the operation some 72,000 troops were in place. 'These troops know how to shoot and kill,' said the governor, 'and I expect they will.'[12]

And so they did. On Danziger Bridge on the city's east side, police opened fire on six innocent, unarmed black residents,

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killing a seventeen-year-old boy and a mentally disabled man of forty (five of the officers involved were later sentenced to lengthy prison terms).[13]

True, the disaster in New Orleans was an extreme case. But the dynamic during disasters is almost always the same: adversity strikes and there's a wave of spontaneous cooperation in response, then the authorities panic and unleash a second disaster.

'My own impression,' writes Rebecca Solnit, whose book *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009) gives a masterful account of Katrina's aftermath, 'is that elite panic comes from powerful people who see all humanity in their own image.'[14] Dictators and despots, governors and generals – they all too often resort to brute force to prevent scenarios that exist only in their own heads, on the assumption that the average Joe is ruled by self-interest, just like them.

2

In the summer of 1999, at a small school in the Belgian town of Bornem, nine children came down with a mysterious illness. They'd come to school that morning with no symptoms; after lunch they were all ill. Headaches. Vomiting. Palpitations. Casting about for an explanation, the only thing the teachers could think of was the Coca-Cola the nine had drunk during break.

It didn't take long for journalists to get wind of the story. Over at Coca-Cola headquarters, the phones started ringing. That same evening the company issued a press release stating that millions of bottles were being recalled from Belgian store shelves. 'We are searching frantically and hope to have a definitive answer in the next few days,' said a spokeswoman.[15]

But it was too late. The symptoms had spread through Belgium and jumped the border into France. Pale, limp kids were being rushed off in ambulances. Within days, suspicion had spread to all Coca-Cola products. Fanta, Sprite, Nestea, Aquarius . . . they all seemed a danger to children. The 'Coca-

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Cola Incident' was one of the worst financial blows in the company's 107-year history, forcing it to recall seventeen million cases of soft drinks in Belgium and destroy its warehoused stock.[16] In the end, the cost was more than 200 million dollars.[17]

Then something odd happened. A few weeks later, the toxicologists issued their lab report. What had they found after running their tests on the cans of Coke? Nothing. No pesticides. No pathogens. No toxic metals. Nada. And their tests on the blood and urine samples from hundreds of patients? Zilch. The scientists were unable to find a single chemical cause for the severe symptoms which by that time had been documented in more than a thousand boys and girls.

'Those kids really were sick, there's no doubt about that,' said one of the researchers. 'But not from drinking a Coke.'[18]

The Coca-Cola incident speaks to an age-old philosophical question.

What is truth?

Some things are true whether you believe in them or not. Water boils at 100°C. Smoking kills. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on 22 November 1963.

Other things have the potential to be true, if we believe in them. Our belief becomes what sociologists dub a *self-fulfilling prophecy*: if you predict a bank will go bust and that convinces lots of people to close their accounts, then, sure enough, the bank will go bust.

Or take the placebo effect. If your doctor gives you a fake pill and says it will cure what ails you, chances are you *will* feel better. The more dramatic the placebo, the bigger that chance. Injection, on the whole, is more effective than pills, and in the old days even bloodletting could do the trick – not because medieval medicine was so advanced, but because people felt a procedure that drastic was bound to have an impact.

And the ultimate placebo? Surgery! Don a white coat, administer an anaesthetic, and then kick back and pour yourself a cup of coffee. When the patient revives tell them the operation was a success. A broad review carried out by the

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British Medical Journal comparing actual surgical procedures with sham surgery (for conditions like back pain and heartburn) revealed that placebos also helped in three-quarters of all cases, and in half were just as effective as the real thing.[19]

But it also works the other way around.

Take a fake pill thinking it will make you sick, and chances are it will. Warn your patients a drug has serious side effects, and it probably will. For obvious reasons, the *nocebo* effect, as it's called, hasn't been widely tested, given the touchy ethics of convincing healthy people they're ill. Nevertheless, all the evidence suggests nocebos can be very powerful.

That's also what Belgian health officials concluded in the summer of 1999. Possibly there really was something wrong with one or two of the Cokes those kids in Bornem drank. Who's to say? But beyond that, the scientists were unequivocal: the hundreds of other children across the country had been infected with a 'mass psychogenic illness'. In plain English: they imagined it.

Which is not to say the victims were pretending. More than a thousand Belgian kids were genuinely nauseated, feverish and dizzy. If you believe something enough, it can become real. If there's one lesson to be drawn from the nocebo effect, it's that ideas are never *merely* ideas. We are what we believe. We find what we go looking for. And what we predict, comes to pass.

Maybe you see where I'm going with this: our grim view of humanity is also a nocebo.

If we *believe* most people can't be trusted, that's how we'll treat each other, to everyone's detriment. Few ideas have as much power to shape the world as our view of other people. Because ultimately, you get what you expect to get. If we want to tackle the greatest challenges of our times – from the climate crisis to our growing distrust of one another – then I think the place we need to start is our view of human nature.

To be clear: this book is not a sermon on the fundamental goodness of people. Obviously, we're not angels. We're complex creatures, with a good side and a not-so-good side. The question is which side we turn to.

My argument is simply this: that we – by nature, as children,

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on an uninhabited island, when war breaks out, when crisis hits – have a powerful preference for our good side. I will present the considerable scientific evidence showing just how realistic a more positive view of human nature is. At the same time, I'm convinced it could be more of a reality if we'd start to believe it.

Floating around the Internet is a parable of unknown origin. It contains what I believe is a simple but profound truth:

> An old man says to his grandson: 'There's a fight going on inside me. It's a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – angry, greedy, jealous, arrogant, and cowardly. The other is good – peaceful, loving, modest, generous, honest, and trustworthy. These two wolves are also fighting within you, and inside every other person too.'
>
> After a moment, the boy asks, 'Which wolf will win?'
>
> The old man smiles.
>
> 'The one you feed.'

3

Over the last few years, whenever I told people about this book I've been working on, I was met with raised eyebrows. Expressions of disbelief. A German publisher flatly turned down my book proposal. Germans, she said, don't believe in humanity's innate goodness. A member of the Parisian intelligentsia assured me that the French need government's firm hand. And when I toured the United States after the 2016 presidential election, everyone, everywhere, asked me if my head was screwed on straight.

Most people are decent? Had I ever turned on a television?

Not so long ago, a study by two American psychologists proved once again how stubbornly people can cling to the idea of our own selfish nature. The researchers presented test subjects with several situations featuring other people doing apparently nice things. So what did they find? Basically, that we are trained to see selfishness everywhere.

See someone helping an elderly person cross the street?

What a show-off.

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See someone offering money to a homeless person?

Must want to feel better about herself.

Even after the researchers presented their subjects with hard data about strangers returning lost wallets, or the fact that the vast majority of the population doesn't cheat or steal, most subjects did not view humanity in a more positive light. 'Instead,' write the psychologists, 'they decide that seemingly selfless behaviors must be selfish after all.'[20]

Cynicism is a theory of everything. The cynic is always right.

Now, you may be thinking: wait a second, that's not how I was raised. Where I come from we trusted each other, helped each other and left our doors unlocked. And you're right, from up close, it's easy to assume people are decent. People like our families and friends, our neighbours and our co-workers.

But when we zoom out to the rest of humanity, suspicion quickly takes over. Take the World Values Survey, a huge poll conducted since the 1980s by a network of social scientists in almost a hundred countries. One standard question is: 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?'

The results are pretty disheartening. In nearly every country most people think most other people can't be trusted. Even in established democracies like France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States, the majority of the population shares this poor view of their fellow human beings.[21]

The question that has long fascinated me is *why* we take such a negative view of humanity. When our instinct is to trust those in our immediate communities, why does our attitude change when applied to people as a whole? Why do so many laws and regulations, so many companies and institutions start with the assumption that people can't be trusted? Why, when the science consistently tells us we live on Planet A, do we persist in believing we're on Planet B?

Is it a lack of education? Hardly. In this book I will introduce dozens of intellectuals who are staunch believers in our immorality. Political conviction? No again. Quite a few religions take it as a tenet of faith that humans are mired in sin. Many a

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capitalist presumes we're all motivated by self-interest. Lots of environmentalists see humans as a destructive plague upon the earth. Thousands of opinions; one take on human nature.

This got me wondering. Why do we imagine humans are bad? What made us start believing in the wicked nature of our kind?

Imagine for a moment that a new drug comes on the market. It's super-addictive, and in no time everyone's hooked. Scientists investigate and soon conclude that the drug causes, I quote, 'a misperception of risk, anxiety, lower mood levels, learned helplessness, contempt and hostility towards others, [and] desensitization'.[22]

Would we use this drug? Would our kids be allowed to try it? Would government legalise it? To all of the above: yes. Because what I'm talking about is already one of the biggest addictions of our times. A drug we use daily, that's heavily subsidised and is distributed to our children on a massive scale.

That drug is the news.

I was raised to believe that the news is good for your development. That as an engaged citizen it's your duty to read the paper and watch the evening news. That the more we follow the news, the better informed we are and the healthier our democracy. This is still the story many parents tell their kids, but scientists are reaching very different conclusions. The news, according to dozens of studies, is a mental health hazard.[23]

First to open up this field of research, back in the 1990s, was George Gerbner (1919–2005). He also coined a term to describe the phenomenon he found: *mean world syndrome*, whose clinical symptoms are cynicism, misanthropy and pessimism. People who follow the news are more likely to agree with statements such as 'Most people care only about themselves.' They more often believe that we as individuals are helpless to better the world. They are more likely to be stressed and depressed.

A few years ago, people in thirty different countries were

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asked a simple question: ‘Overall, do you think the world is getting better, staying the same, or getting worse?’ In every country, from Russia to Canada, from Mexico to Hungary, the vast majority of people answered that things are getting *worse*.[24] The reality is exactly the opposite. Over the last several decades, extreme poverty, victims of war, child mortality, crime, famine, child labour, deaths in natural disasters and the number of plane crashes have all plummeted. We’re living in the richest, safest, healthiest era ever.

So why don’t we realise this? It’s simple. Because the news is about the exceptional, and the more exceptional an event is – be it a terrorist attack, violent uprising, or natural disaster – the bigger its newsworthiness. You’ll never see a headline reading NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY DOWN BY 137,000 SINCE YESTERDAY, even though it could accurately have been reported *every day over the last twenty-five years*.[25] Nor will you ever see a broadcast go live to a reporter on the ground who says, ‘I’m standing here in the middle of nowhere, where today there’s still no sign of war.’

A couple of years ago, a team of Dutch sociologists analysed how aeroplane crashes are reported in the media. Between 1991 and 2005, when the number of accidents consistently dropped, they found media attention for such accidents consistently grew. And as you might expect, people grew increasingly fearful to fly on these increasingly safe planes.[26]

In another study, a team of media researchers compiled a database of over four million news items on immigration, crime and terrorism in order to determine if there were any patterns. What they found is that in times when immigration or violence declines, newspapers give them *more* coverage. ‘Hence,’ they concluded, ‘there seems to be none or even a negative relationship between news and reality.’[27]

Of course, by ‘the news’ I don’t mean all journalism. Many forms of journalism help us better understand the world. But the news – by which I mean reporting on recent, incidental and sensational events – is most common. Eight in ten adults in

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western countries are daily news consumers. On average, we spend one hour a day getting our news fix. Added up over a lifetime, that's three years.[28]

Why are we humans so susceptible to the doom and gloom of the news? Two reasons. The first is what psychologists call *negativity bias*: we're more attuned to the bad than the good. Back in our hunting and gathering days, we were better off being frightened of a spider or a snake a hundred times too often than one time too few. Too much fear wouldn't kill you; too little surely would.

Second, we're also burdened with an *availability bias*. If we can easily recall examples of a given thing, we assume that thing is relatively common. The fact that we're bombarded daily with horrific stories about aircraft disasters, child snatchers and beheadings – which tend to lodge in the memory – completely skews our view of the world. As the Lebanese statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb dryly notes, 'We are not rational enough to be exposed to the press'.[29]

In this digital age, the news we're being fed is only getting more extreme. In the old days, journalists didn't know much about their individual readers. They wrote for the masses. But the people behind Facebook, Twitter and Google know you well. They know what shocks and horrifies you, they know what makes you click. They know how to grab your attention and hold it so they can serve you the most lucrative helping of personalised ads.

This modern media frenzy is nothing less than an assault on the mundane. Because, let's be honest, the lives of most people are pretty predictable. Nice, but boring. So while we'd prefer having nice neighbours with boring lives (and thankfully most neighbours fit the bill), 'boring' won't make you sit up and take notice. 'Nice' doesn't sell ads. And so Silicon Valley keeps dishing us up ever more sensational clickbait, knowing full well, as a Swiss novelist once quipped, that 'News is to the mind what sugar is to the body.'[30]

A few years ago I resolved to make a change. No more watching the news or scrolling through my phone at breakfast.

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any good and inclined to all evil'.

Weirdly, not only traditional Christianity but also the Enlightenment, which placed reason over faith, is rooted in a grim view of human nature. Orthodox faithful were convinced our kind is essentially depraved and the best we can do is apply a thin gloss of piety. Enlightenment philosophers also thought we were depraved, but prescribed a coating of reason to cover the rot.

When it comes to notions about human nature, the continuity throughout Western thought is striking. 'For this can be said of men in general: that they are ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites,' summed up the founder of political science, Niccolò Machiavelli. 'All men would be tyrants if they could,' agreed John Adams, founder of American democracy. 'We are descended from an endless series of generations of murderers,' diagnosed Sigmund Freud, founder of modern psychology.

In the nineteenth century Charles Darwin burst onto the scene with his theory of evolution, and it too was swiftly given the veneer treatment. The renowned scientist Thomas Henry Huxley (aka 'Darwin's Bulldog') preached that life is one great battle 'of man against man and of nation against nation'.[38] The philosopher Herbert Spencer sold hundreds of thousands of books on his assertion that we should fan the flames of this battle, since 'the whole effort of Nature is to get rid of [the poor] – to clear the world of them, and make room for better'.[39]

Strangest of all is that these thinkers were almost unanimously hailed as 'realists', while dissident thinkers were ridiculed for believing in human decency.[40] Emma Goldman, a feminist whose struggle for freedom and equality earned her a lifetime of slander and contempt, once wrote: 'Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name! […] The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature.'[41]

Only recently have scientists from an array of different fields come to the conclusion that our grim view of humanity is due for radical revision. This awareness is still so incipient that

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many of them don't realise they have company. As one prominent psychologist exclaimed when I told her about the new currents in biology: 'Oh God, so it's happening there as well?'[42]

4

Before I report on my quest for a new view of humankind, I want to share three warnings.

First, to stand up for human goodness is to stand up against a hydra – that mythological seven-headed monster that grew back two heads for every one Hercules lopped off. Cynicism works a lot like that. For every misanthropic argument you deflate, two more will pop up in its place. Veneer theory is a zombie that just keeps coming back.

Second, to stand up for human goodness is to take a stand against the powers that be. For the powerful, a hopeful view of human nature is downright threatening. Subversive. Seditious. It implies that we're not selfish beasts that need to be reined in, restrained and regulated. It implies that we need a different kind of leadership. A company with intrinsically motivated employees has no need of managers; a democracy with engaged citizens has no need of career politicians.

Third, to stand up for human goodness means weathering a storm of ridicule. You'll be called naive. Obtuse. Any weakness in your reasoning will be mercilessly exposed. Basically, it's easier to be a cynic. The pessimistic professor who preaches the doctrine of human depravity can predict anything he wants, for if his prophecies don't come true now, just wait: failure could always be just around the corner. Or else, his voice of reason has prevented the worst. The prophets of doom sound oh so profound, whatever they spout.

The reasons for hope, by contrast, are always provisional. Nothing has gone wrong – yet. You haven't been cheated – yet. An idealist can be right her whole life and still be dismissed as naive. This book is intended to change that. Because what seems unreasonable, unrealistic and impossible today can turn

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out to be inevitable tomorrow.

It's time for a new realism. It's time for a new view of humankind.

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2

The Real *Lord of the Flies*

1

When I started writing this book, I knew there was one story I would have to address.

The story takes place on a deserted island somewhere in the Pacific. A plane has just gone down. The only survivors are some British schoolboys, who can't believe their good fortune. It's as if they've just crash-landed in one of their adventure books. Nothing but beach, shells and water for miles. And better yet: no grown-ups.

On the very first day, the boys institute a democracy of sorts. One boy – Ralph – is elected to be the group's leader. Athletic, charismatic and handsome, he's the golden boy of the bunch. Ralph's game plan is simple: 1) Have fun. 2) Survive. 3) Make smoke signals for passing ships.

Number one is a success. The others? Not so much. Most of the boys are more interested in feasting and frolicking than in tending the fire. Jack, the redhead, develops a passion for hunting pigs and as time progresses he and his friends grow increasingly reckless. When a ship does finally pass in the distance, they've abandoned their post at the fire.

'You're breaking the rules!' Ralph accuses angrily.

Jack shrugs. 'Who cares?'

'The rules are the only thing we've got!'

When night falls, the boys are gripped by terror, fearful of the beast they believe is lurking on the island. In reality, the only beast is inside them. Before long, they've begun painting their faces. Casting off their clothes. And they develop overpowering urges – to pinch, to kick, to bite.

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Of all the boys, only one manages to keep a cool head. Piggy, as the others call him because he's pudgier than the rest, has asthma, wears glasses and can't swim. Piggy is the voice of reason, to which nobody listens. 'What are we?' he wonders mournfully. 'Humans? Or animals? Or savages?'

Weeks pass. Then, one day, a British naval officer comes ashore. The island is now a smouldering wasteland. Three of the children, including Piggy, are dead. 'I should have thought,' the officer reproaches them, 'that a pack of British boys would have been able to put up a better show than that.' Ralph, the leader of the once proper and well-behaved band of boys, bursts into tears.

'Ralph wept for the end of innocence,' we read, and for 'the darkness of man's heart …'

This story never happened. An English schoolmaster made it up in 1951. 'Wouldn't it be a good idea,' William Golding asked his wife one day, 'to write a story about some boys on an island, showing how they would really behave?'[1]

Golding's book *Lord of the Flies* would ultimately sell tens of millions of copies, be translated into more than thirty languages and be hailed as one of the classics of the twentieth century.

In hindsight, the secret to the book's success is clear. Golding had a masterful ability to portray the darkest depths of mankind. 'Even if we start with a clean slate,' he wrote in his first letter to his publisher, 'our nature compels us to make a muck of it.'[2] Or as he later put it, 'Man produces evil as a bee produces honey.'[3]

Of course, Golding had the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s on his side, when a new generation was questioning its parents about the atrocities of the Second World War. Had Auschwitz been an anomaly, they wanted to know, or is there a Nazi hiding in each of us?

In *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding intimated the latter and scored an instant hit. So much so, argued the influential critic Lionel Trilling, that the novel 'Marked a mutation in culture.'[4] Eventually, Golding even won a Nobel Prize for his oeuvre. His work 'illuminate[s] the human condition in the world of today,'

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archive upon archive, I couldn't find a thing.

Sometimes all it takes is a stroke of luck. Sifting through a newspaper archive one day, I typed a year incorrectly and ended up deep in the 1960s. And there it was. The reference to 1977 in Agnelli's report turns out to have been a typo.

In the 6 October 1966 edition of Australian newspaper *The Age*, a headline jumped out at me: 'sunday showing for tongan castaways'. The story concerned six boys who had been found three weeks earlier on a rocky islet south of Tonga, an island group in the Pacific Ocean (and a British protectorate until 1970). The boys had been rescued by an Australian sea captain after being marooned on the island of 'Ata for more than a year. According to the article, the captain had even got a television station to film a re-enactment of the boys' adventure.

'Their survival story already is regarded as one of the great classic stories of the sea,' the piece concluded.

I was bursting with questions. Were the boys still alive? And could I find the television footage? Most importantly, though, I had a lead: the captain's name was Peter Warner. Maybe he was even still alive! But how do you go about locating an elderly man on the other side of the globe?

As I did a search for the captain's name, I had another stroke of luck. In a recent issue of the *Daily Mercury*, a tiny local paper from Mackay, Australia, I came across the headline: MATES SHARE 50-YEAR BOND. Printed alongside was a small photograph of two men, smiling, one with his arm slung around the other. The article began: 'Deep in a banana plantation at Tullera, near Lismore, sits an unlikely pair of mates [...] These men have laughing eyes and a sparkling energy that belies their age. The elder is 83 years old, the son of a wealthy industrialist. The younger, 67, was, literally, a child of nature.'[11]

Their names? Peter Warner and Mano Totau. And where had they met?

On a deserted island.

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We set out one September morning. My wife Maartje and I had rented a car in Brisbane, on Australia's east coast, and I was seated anxiously at the wheel. The nerves may have had something to do with the fact that it took me six attempts to pass my driving test, and now I had to navigate on the left-hand side of the road. But also: I was on my way to meet a main character from 'one of the great classic stories of the sea'.

Some three hours later we arrived at our destination, a spot in the middle of nowhere that stumped Google Maps. Yet there he was, sitting out in front of a low-slung house off this dirt road: the man who rescued six lost boys fifty years ago. Captain Peter Warner.

Before I tell his story, there are a few things you should know about Peter, because his life alone is worth a movie. He was born the youngest son of Arthur Warner, once one of the richest and most powerful men in Australia. Back in the 1930s, Arthur ruled over a vast empire called Electronic Industries, which dominated the country's radio market at the time.

Peter had been groomed to follow in his father's footsteps. Instead, at the age of seventeen, he ran away. He went to sea in search of adventure. 'I'd prefer to fight nature rather than human beings,' he later explained.[12]

Peter spent the next few years sailing the seven seas, from Hong Kong to Stockholm, from Shanghai to St Petersburg. When he finally returned five years later, the prodigal son proudly presented his father with a Swedish captain's certificate. Unimpressed, Warner Sr demanded his son learn a useful profession.

'What's easiest?' Peter asked.

'Accountancy,' Arthur lied.[13]

It took another five years of night school for Peter to earn his degree. He went to work for his father's company, yet the sea still beckoned, and whenever he could get away Peter went to Tasmania, where he kept his own fishing fleet. It was this fishing on the side that brought him to Tonga in the winter of 1966. He had arranged an audience with the king to ask permission to trap lobster in Tongan waters. Unfortunately, His

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Majesty Taufa‘ahau Tupou IV refused.

Disappointed, Peter headed back to Tasmania, but on the way he took a little detour, outside royal waters, to cast his nets. And that’s when he saw it: a minuscule island in the azure sea.

The island of ‘Ata.

Peter knew that no ships had anchored there in ages. The island had been inhabited once, up until one dark day in 1863, when a slave ship appeared on the horizon and sailed off with the natives. Since then, ‘Ata had been deserted – cursed and forgotten.

But Peter noticed something odd. Peering through his binoculars, he saw burned patches on the green cliffs. ‘In the tropics it’s unusual for fires to start spontaneously,’ he told us, a half century later. ‘So I decided to investigate.’ As his boat approached the western tip of the island, Peter heard a shout from the crow’s nest.

‘Someone’s calling!’ yelled one of his men.

‘Nonsense,’ Peter shouted back. ‘It’s just squawking seabirds.’

But then, through his binoculars, he saw a boy. Naked. Hair down to his shoulders. This wild creature leaped from the cliffside and plunged into the water. Suddenly more boys followed, screaming at the top of their lungs.

Peter ordered his crew to load their guns, mindful of the Polynesian custom of dumping dangerous criminals on remote islands. It didn’t take long for the first boy to reach the boat. ‘My name is Fatai,’ he cried in perfect English. ‘There are six of us and we reckon we’ve been here fifteen months.’

Peter was more than a little sceptical. The boys, once aboard, claimed they were students at a boarding school in Nuku‘alofa, the Tongan capital. Sick of school meals, they had decided to take a fishing boat out one day, only to get caught in a storm.

Likely story, Peter thought. Using his two-way radio, he called in to Nuku‘alofa. ‘I’ve got six kids here,’ he told the operator. ‘If I give you their names, can you telephone the school to find out if they’re pupils there?’

‘Stand by,’ came the response.

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Twenty minutes ticked by. (As Peter tells this part of the story, he gets a little misty-eyed.)

Finally, 'A very tearful operator came on the radio, and said, "You found them! These boys have been given up for dead. Funerals have been held. If it's them, this is a miracle!"'

I asked Peter if he'd ever heard of the book *Lord of the Flies*.

'Yes, I've read it,' he laughed. 'But that's a completely different story!'

4

In the months that followed I tried to reconstruct as precisely as possible what had happened on that tiny island of 'Ata. Peter's memory turned out to be excellent. Even at the age of ninety, everything he recounted was consistent with the other sources.[14]

My foremost other source lived a few hours' drive from Peter. Mano Totau, fifteen years old at the time and now pushing seventy, counted the captain among his closest friends. A couple days after our visit with Peter, Mano was waiting to welcome me and my wife in his garage in Deception Bay, just north of Brisbane.

The real *Lord of the Flies*, Mano told us, began in June 1965.

The protagonists were six boys, all pupils at St Andrew's, a strict Anglican boarding school in Nuku'alofa. The oldest was sixteen, the youngest thirteen, and they had one main thing in common: they were bored witless. The teenagers longed for adventure instead of assignments, for life at sea instead of school.

So they came up with a plan to escape: to Fiji, some five hundred miles away, or even all the way to New Zealand. 'Lots of other kids at school knew about it,' Mano recalled, 'but they all thought it was a joke.'

There was only one obstacle. None of them owned a boat, so they decided to 'borrow' one from Mr Taniela Uhila, a fisherman they all disliked.

The boys took little time to prepare for the voyage. Two

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sacks of bananas, a few coconuts and a small gas burner were all the supplies they packed. It didn't occur to any of them to bring a map, let alone a compass. And none of them was an experienced sailor. Only the youngest, Tevita, knew how to steer a boat (which, according to him, 'was why they wanted me to come along').[15]

The journey began without a hitch. No one noticed the small craft leaving the harbour that evening. Skies were fair; only a mild breeze ruffled the calm sea.

But that night the boys made a grave error. They fell asleep. A few hours later they awoke to water crashing down over their heads. It was dark. All they could see were foaming waves cresting around them. They hoisted the sail, which the wind promptly tore to shreds. Next to break was the rudder. 'When we get home,' joked Sione, the eldest, 'we must tell Taniela his boat is just like himself – too old and cranky.'[16]

In the days that followed there was little to joke about. 'We drifted for eight days,' Mano told me. 'Without food. Without water.' The boys tried catching fish. They managed to collect some rainwater in hollowed-out coconut shells and shared it equally between them, each taking a sip in the morning and another in the evening. Sione tried boiling seawater on the gas burner, but it tipped over and burned a large part of his leg.

Then, on the eighth day, they spied a miracle on the horizon. Land. A small island, to be precise. Not a tropical paradise with waving palm trees and sandy beaches, but a hulking mass of rock, jutting up more than a thousand feet out of the ocean.

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