**Humankind, human nature, and misanthropy**

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Essay review of Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, trans. Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore (London: Bloomsbury, 2020, xxii + 496pp, £12 hb.

‘This is a book about a radical idea’, announces Danish historian, Rutger Bregman: ‘most people, deep down, are pretty decent’ (2). *Humankind* is a sequel to his best-selling 2016 book, *Utopia for Realists*. Its eighteen chapters offer a happier vision of human nature and an upbeat case for future progress. In a cutesy term, humans are really *Homo puppy –* essentially friendly, gentle, attuned to the feelings of others. Our evolution wasn’t a Spencerian ‘struggle for survival’, but a cuddly ‘*snuggle* for survival’ (100). Early chapters skilfully critique some famous experiments purported to confirm darker visions of our nature, key villains being Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo. Others offer inspiring accounts of cooperation among juvenile castaways (less *Lord of the Flies*, more Garden of Eden) and the interesting, documented reluctance of most soldiers to actually shoot at their enemies (less of an obstacle to killing in an age of drone strikes). Later chapters get political, offering trendy political proposals (less testing and more play at school, shorter working weeks) and blanditudinous moral advice of the ‘Be The Change You Want To See In The World’ sort.

Bregman begins by urging a ‘new realism’ about human nature, announcing that, to tackle climate change and other ‘challenges of our times’, where ‘we need to start is our view of human nature’ (9). We fall victim to pessimistic accounts of ourselves as competitive, selfish, and violent, then build social and economic systems that reshape us in that image. Certainly, this is a welcome corrective to crasser ideologies of selfishness of the *Selfish Gene* sort, but there are two problems. First, those ideologies were quickly challenged by ethologists and primatologists who noted that individual selfish behaviour presupposes stable backgrounds of cooperation. Second, Bregman is wrong to think that dealing with major ‘challenges’ requires focusing on *human nature*. Another option he consistently downplays is attending to structures and cultures – to what has come to be humanity. Our evolutionary history shapes our inherited behavioural dispositions, but if and how those dispositions manifest depends on the imperatives and possibilities afforded by our shared ways of living. Crucially, those structures often fuel the failings that fire those ‘challenges’ - arrogance, brutality, dogmatism, greed, enmity, manipulativeness, tribalism, wastefulness. By downplaying structures, Bregman can retail cosily heart-warming stories, free of any complicating realities. The ‘courage and charity’ of survivors of Hurricane Katrina, for instance, was partly necessitated by the sustained neglect of the city and its people, before and after the storm, due to the institutional racism of the United States, which goes unmentioned (4-7).

The focus on our underlying *human nature* obscures the structures and cultures of *humanity*, the collective ways we organise and arrange our lives. Bregman’s invitation to conceive of ourselves as *Homo puppies* comes at the cost of ignoring the ways our failings are collectively scaffolded. The wastefulness, mercilessness, and rapacity built into the systematic exploitative abuse of animals and nature cannot be reduced to the vicious actions of rogue individuals. Those failings are integral to the activities and habits that have contingently came to characterise our carbon-intensive, consumerist ways of life. Bregman sometimes admits this, albeit only in breezy qualifications. ‘We’re complex creatures, with a good side and a not-so-good side […] My argument is simply this: that we – by nature, as children – have a powerful preference for our good side’ (10). But this ignores the fact that preferences can be overmastered, especially when subjected to incentives to selfishness, a point only noted if and when convenient, as when Bregman (rightly) lambasts the ways that ‘hate is being pumped into society’ by right-wing media (371). Focusing on human nature therefore misleads us, compelling us to appraise ourselves in the terms of what we were, rather than on what we have come to be.

Bregman defends his upbeat vision of human nature using several strategies. The critiques of Milgram, Zimbardo, and others, though compelling and well-done, arguably miss the point. For most people, the atrociousness of people isn’t confirmed by how they behave under artificial laboratory conditions – when ordered, by an unblinking scientist, to electrocute someone. It is confirmed by their everyday experiences of what Montaigne called ‘ordinary vices’ – the myriad acts, little or major, of callousness, mindlessness, and selfishness that run through human life. Bregman, interestingly, often mentions our failings, but only for the narrative purpose of setting up villains or motivating radical action. Indeed, he rejects critical stances on humanity using dodgy tactics: ‘cynicism, misanthropy, and pessimism’ are pathologized as ‘clinical symptoms’ of a ‘mean world theory’ (13). Bregman derides cynicism as an unfalsifiable ‘theory of everything’, able to twist any fact to in its favour, without seeing that’s also true of optimism (11).

Although Bregman criticises these negative stances, *Humankind* often sounds like it is making the case for a misanthropic verdict on humanity. Vast moral atrocities, like genocide, are ‘singularly human’, our world institutionalises ‘survival of the shameless’, and is choked with collective self-delusion, oppression, ignorance. Our social, educational, and economic systems conspire to crush our curiosity and spontaneity for the sake of profit, prejudice, and dogma – all familiar from the litanies of modern misanthropes (74, 239). Sometimes, Bregman fails to connect the dots. A consoling assurance that it ‘takes immense effort’ to draw out our violent, egoistic impulses is followed, a hundred pages later, by warnings we are ‘undermining one another’s intrinsic motivation on a massive scale’ (170, 271).

A closely related tendency is reliance on blasé claims about humanity’s moral progress. The unreferenced assertion that ‘slavery has been abolished’ ignores the 40 million people currently enslaved and the 150 million child workers whose conditions and rights are barely distinguishable from enslavesment (111). Confidence in future moral progress is supported by two other slippery arguments: overgeneralising from single cases of local successes and reliance on hopeful speculation, of what might be if … Yet as shown by contemporary work in philosophy of public policy, what worked *there* may not work *here*: the efficacy of policies doesn’t automatically carry over to other regional or national contexts. As for optimistic speculations, they sit uneasily with the structural obstacles to a better future which Bregman consistently downplays.

Despite his themes of morality and human nature, Bregman barely engages moral psychology and history of philosophy. He duly noting a ‘hallowed tradition’ of relevant figures, only to subject them to detail-free summaries that indicate nothing about their specific claims or arguments (17-18). No mention is made of Indian and Chinese traditions, either, where our moral condition and potential have been central themes. Only three philosophers – Rousseau, Hobbes, Machiavelli – get decent airtime, albeit with their details mangled. Despite making Rousseau the hero of his story, nothing is said about *amour-propre*, the distinction of ‘natural’ and ‘civilized’ man, or the corrupting effects of civilization (45-47ff). Contrary to popular misconceptions, Machiavelli’s position was *not* that a prince should be mendacious and cruel for the sake of their own advancement. It was that, under certain adverse conditions, a prince should use dissimulation and harshness specifically to maintain the integrity of the state (56f). Moreover, contrary to what Bregman seems to think, Hobbes’ state-of-nature argument isn’t an empirical hypothesis about the historical development of human beings (and, incidentally, such arguments first appeared, not in *Leviathan*, but early Buddhist and Chinese texts).

*Humankind* ends with expansive, upbeat proposals for corrective action at the individual and political levels. Bregman is candid about his socialism, urging participatory budgeting, fostering mutual trust in local communities and other measures that allegedly better fit our essential good natures. These last chapters contain more slipperiness, like the specious argument that, as it happens, most of us are actually committed to communism, since our everyday lives are filled with ‘communist acts’, like holding open doors for one another (307-308). Passing over the terminological sleight-of-hand, interpreting such behaviours as socialist is questionable: they can be just as easily articulated in the terms of politically conservative values – quiet courtesy, deference, and respect for others. *Humankind* ends with a favourite feature of the modern self-help literature – a set of ten ‘Rules to Live By’, summarising the general lessons of the book. Unfortunately, all of them are questionable. ‘Kindness is catching’ will come as a surprise to those millions of people who suffer everyday acts of abandonment and abuse. ‘Be true to your nature’ ignores the vast pressures on we *Homo puppies* to act like wolves – *Homo homini lupus*. ‘When in doubt, assume the best’ is only reasonable for those sufficiently privileged to take for granted the esteem and assistance of others (396, 397).

*Humankind* falters because Bregman occasionally admits, but consistently fails to honour, the fact that human beings are, in Mary Midgley’s nice phrase, ‘dappled’. We are shot through with streaks of selfishness and selflessness, virtue and vice, wisdom and wickedness. The problem is that our worst dispositions are disproportionately activated and energised by entrenched features of our world as it has come to be. Our good impulses are too often smothered or starved by the oppressively corrupting artifice of our societies and cultures, Ironically, this was precisely Rousseau’s point about the morally damaging experience of our emergence as ‘civilized man’. What *Humankind* misses is that we need not be ‘fundamentally flawed’, only that we are – and continue to be – contingently corrupted (137).

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