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To cite this article:

Coban, S., (2021). Book Review: Factfulness – Ten Reasons We’re Wrong about the World – and Why Things are Better than You Think, *Horizon Insights*, 4(2), 26-27. <https://doi.org/10.31175/hi.2021.02.04>

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Horizon Insights Journal Homepage: <https://behorizon.org/horizon-insights/>

ISSN: 2593-3582 (printed), 2593-3590 (online)

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Book Review: Factfulness – Ten Reasons We’re Wrong about the World – and Why Things are Better than You Think

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This book is about “**getting the big picture right**”. Hans Rosling, the author of the book, advocates a fact-based worldview and struggles with ignorance. Rosling was a medical doctor, professor of international health, and public educator. He was an adviser to the World Health Organisation and UNICEF, and he co-founded Médecins Sans Frontières in Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation. And working at the global governance institutions indeed necessitates a holistic perspective, focusing on patterns and general rules, but not at the expense of facts.

While trying to understand widespread ignorance observed in almost all society clusters, the author focuses on our instincts. An Overdramatic worldview which tends to draw a pessimistic picture that describes the outer world no matter what the facts tell is a product of our brain and an obvious misconception. When we check reality with facts rather than instincts and emotions, we see a different picture. So the data, or some brand-new big data processing techniques and applications are not enough to cure

the ignorance. A conscious change of approach is necessary. We need to overcome our instincts and observe the outer world with a factful approach. We think we know the world. But we need to ask how the world really is. Obviously, this is not easy. You need to leave your comfort zone. You need to improve your critical thinking skills. You need to convince yourself that even you can be wrong.

Rosling examines ten different instincts that create a gap between the perception and the reality.

The **gap instinct** divides the whole world into two distinct and often conflicting groups, with an imagined gap in between. Rich versus poor, West versus the rest and so on which does not exist in reality at least in the terms that exist in our minds as the author advocates. Without diving into the tiny details about how the data is being collected and how could it be manipulated while being explained (since these are more about disinformation than about cognitive processes of the mind) the author draws slightly oversimplified picture of the situation. The gap between the fact and the perception, according to the author, is stemming from outdated data that we were fed up with. To control the gap instinct, **looking for the majority** rather than extremes might work.

The **negativity instinct** is our tendency to notice the bad more than the good. But statistics prove the opposite. The author gives examples from the basic UN/World Bank administered data showing that almost all aspects of human life are improving as time passes. Misremembering the past, selective reporting and expressing feelings rather than saying what we “think” are among the causes of this negativity instinct. And bad news are more likely to get reported by the media.

The **straight line instinct** is the false idea that the world population is just increasing. The misperception about the population trends in the world is again emanating from a lack of knowledge on more recent data showing that the number of children ceased to increase. The relationship between variables in nature is seldom **linear**.

Various things trigger the **fear instinct**. It distorts what we see of the world. However, it might not be as “true” as it is served to us. In almost all cases the author examined, facts are inconsistent with the factors that create fear. In other words, our fears are not always directed to the riskiest things. To

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control the fear instinct, it is advised to calculate the risks.

People tend to misjudge the **size** of things. They also tend to underrate the importance of a single instance in some cases. These two anomalies make us underestimate the progress. To minimise the size effect, the author advises keeping things “comparable”. And when comparing, keep in mind that rates are more meaningful than amounts. The Pareto Principle (80/20 rule) is also applicable when prioritising things.

The **generalisation instinct** is about categorisation. But sometimes, people mistakenly group things that are actually different, which leads to miscalculations and a biased worldview. In order to overcome it, look for differences within and similarities across groups; beware of “the majority”; beware of exceptional examples; assume you are not “normal”; beware of generalising from one group to another.

The **destiny instinct** is the idea that unalterable features determine our destiny (also known as historical determinism). However, our observations prove that everything is in constant change in the universe, including cultures, nations, religions and people. What confuses us is that sometimes the pace of change might be small. Gradual improvements, 1% a year might have a devastating effect in a more extended period of time.

Simple ideas are attractive since they oversimplify the reality that surrounds us. The **single perspective instinct** provides a single solution for problems that are emanating from a single cause which is not the case in real world, like ideologies. Numbers may also serve to simplify a fact in order to make it more understandable. However, some terms are difficult to capture with numbers, such as freedom, happiness, culture etc.

The **blame instinct** is finding a simple reason or someone responsible for something terrible that has happened. It refrains us from constructing a fact-based understanding of our surrounding. To control this instinct, the author recommends resisting finding a scapegoat.

The **urgency instinct** necessitates that we need to act now because there is a danger or an opportunity awaits us, but for a limited time (window of opportunity). This instinct raises our stress level and paralyses our analytical thinking skills, which leads to poor decisions. To control the urgency instinct, taking small steps is advised.

Using simple mathematics and statistics together with historical data collected in the last century proves that lots of myths are just the consequence of our instincts and have nothing to do with the facts. Global data may help us to grasp trends that are present today and are already shaping our tomorrow. Acting solely on data, not on instinct or fear will lead to a fact-based worldview, and this would be the main takeaway from the book.

Hans Rosling passed away in 2017, having devoted the last years of his life to writing this book. One can feel the passion that he had to formulise an approach to tell the fact-based truth. This easy to read book is a kind of fact-based thinking manual and gives ten rules of thumb for a better data literacy competency.

Pandemic, one of the five global risks that the author warned us to worry about, has already happened (others are financial collapse, World War III, Climate Change and Extreme Poverty). Let's hope that the author mispredicted the rest, or at least we can act in order to fizzle out the author's forecast.