

Rosling, Hans (with Rosling Rönnlund, Anna & Rosling, Ola) – Factfulness

Flatiron Books, 2018, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★★★

Very few persons hold a factual view of what the state of our world is. We consistently think our problems are grimmer than they are. In *Factfulness* the late Hans Rosling points to biases that shape our faulty views and also shows us how to correct them. Rosling was a physician, statistician and Professor of International Health at Karolinska Institute who took the TED Talks audience by storm with his folksy style and enlightening diagrams showing us the world as we hadn't seen it before. The aim of his public talks as well as this book was simply to combat the ignorance of how the world looks, since without a correct worldview we will make the wrong decisions.

First out the reader is put to the test as Rosling asks thirteen multiple choice questions about the state of the world, i.e. topics like population growth, life expectancies, literacy, income distribution, education, health and global warming. The same test has previously been put to 14.000 persons globally and excluding the global warming questions the average number of correct answers was two out of twelve. We significantly underperform blind chance and the results are little different or even worse among population groups with higher education. We are actively and systematically misrepresenting the world.

The problem isn't a lack of facts, an evil conspiracy or fake news, but our own biases. We are hard wired to over-dramatize. We notice and remember spectacular events while we ignore gradual but more important changes. Further, negative events render a lot more interest than positive. A commercial media industry that competes for consumer attention then naturally serves us exactly this; a never ending array of spectacular negative news items. This is what sells, and this is also what we as media consumers want to buy. Incentives also matter in other ways. Rosling, who at least in his youth politically had a leftist bent, in one of his public speeches notices that professional investors were among those with the most fact based view

and showed the most interest to learn and correct what they had gotten wrong. The reason was simple. If they got it wrong they lost money. In contrast, developing world aid workers knew less and also didn't really want to change. A world in disarray was what they thought necessary in order to mobilize the rich to help the poor. At least some even felt threatened by a world view where the developing world wasn't a helpless victim being brutalized by their former colonial masters.

Factfulness isn't a book that tries to show the true state of the world, but a book that in ten chapters lists ten cognitive biases in how we understand our surroundings. Rosling calls them the Gap Instinct, the Straight Line Instinct, the Blame Instinct and so on. Some are due to our less developed ability to instinctively grasp statistics, some are due to how emotions often trump analytical reasoning. The chapters all contain introductory anecdotes from Rosling's upbringing and life as a practicing medical doctor in for example rural Africa and as such the book also becomes a type of memoir. The chapters also give practical advice on how to correct the biases so that we can see the world as it is for ourselves.

Rosling charmed the audience of TED Talks with his energetic, enthusiastic, down to earth and almost naïve style presenting a combination of real life stories and graphs on global developments. His combination of integrity and empathy is rare and the distinctly Swedish dialect only added to his popularity. To me, Rosling's style that in public presentations was so disarming and endearing, at first felt a bit banal in written text. In the end however I had to capitulate. Rosling is above all extremely rational and his pursuit to make the world a better place through facts is admirable. The plain language might actually be what gives the book the broad readership it deserves.

Read *Factfulness* both to gain a fact based worldview but also to gain peace of mind as so much is getting better over time.

Mats Larsson, July 9, 2018