

Book Review

Maintaining a Critical yet Hopeful Worldview in Achieving Sustainable Development

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Introduction

If someone asked you whether the world was getting better, worse, or stagnant, what would your answer be? According to Hans Rosling, most people would answer that things are becoming worse. In 2017, Rosling and his peers at Gapminder collaborated with Ipsos MORI and Novus to test 12,000 people in 14 countries about how they thought the world was progressing. The test contained 13 factual questions which were about topics such as the percentage of girls who finish primary school in low-income countries, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty, and more. To Rosling's surprise, most of his respondents only got 3 out of 13 questions right, including those who worked as scientists, investment bankers, and senior political decision makers (Rosling et al., 2018, pp. 3–9). The results of the test concerned Rosling, because having a wrong understanding of factual conditions in the world could also lead to faulty decision-making. This was the primary reason why Rosling decided to write the book titled *Factfulness* with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund.

Factfulness was published by Flatiron Books (US) and Sceptre (UK) in 2018. The book contains a total of 342 pages, which includes eleven chapters of contents as well as notes and sources the authors relied on to write the book. The cover of the book is a plain white background with the title printed in capitalized, orange letters. Overall, the authors tried to explain why humans have the tendency to view the world negatively and how we can be more “factful”.

This book review will include a recap of three important chapters in the book, critiques to consider, as well as a brief conclusion and book rating.

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Fallacies which affect our “factful” worldview

The authors of *Factfulness* wrote that there are ten human “instincts” which cause most of us to believe that the world is becoming worse even though evidence suggests otherwise. After detailing each of those instincts in separate chapters, the authors dedicated the last one to reflect on what society can do to improve the way we review global facts objectively. This section of the book review will cover three out of those eleven chapters.

The “Gap” Instinct

The first chapter is about the “gap” instinct, which the authors described as our tendency to categorize the world into two different extremes which are separated by an impossibly large gap. Such examples include “west vs. the rest” and “developing and developed”. The authors explained how people living in western countries may think the rest of the world lives in poverty because they all belong to the same category of “developing”. In reality, most of the earth’s population lies in between those who are extremely poor and rich. Hans Rosling claimed that he spent years trying to convince the World Bank to stop using their categorization of “developed” and “developing”, as it splits the world into two without actually telling people much about the economic conditions in countries. In 2016, the World Bank finally adopted Hans Rosling’s suggestion to create four income groups instead ([World Bank, n.d.](#)). Research conducted by the authors show that when we use this measurement, people would see that most of the population are in the second and third categories, and are progressively making their way up.

On this, Rosling et al. wrote “... we should do is stop dividing countries into two groups. It doesn’t make sense anymore. It doesn’t help us to understand the world in a practical way. It doesn’t help businesses find opportunities, and it doesn’t help aid money to find the poorest people” ([Rosling et al., 2018](#), p. 32). In other words, dividing the world in two opposite ends doesn’t allow us to accomplish anything productive. Hans Rosling detailed cases in which he encountered investment bankers who refused to invest in promising countries outside the west because they believed that all the other countries were not worth the effort. Not only does splitting the world into two fail to consider those who are in the middle, it may also lead to resources being misplaced when they could be allocated to better places or groups of people.

The “Urgency” Instinct

The authors described the “urgency” instinct as our tendency to act on problems as if the only time we have left is now. The authors acknowledged that there are important issues which require our action, such as climate change. However, they also described the consequences that could arise when we act on fear and little preparation.

In the book, Hans Rosling described his experience working with the Ministry of Health in Liberia to curb the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Wanting to track progress on the policy they implemented as a response to the outbreak, Hans and Ola Rosling analysed the number of cases. Afterwards, they realized that the number of confirmed cases was dropping and people were abiding to the health protocol the government enforced ([Rosling et al., 2018](#), p. 235). This story illustrates how we may sometimes get carried away in trying to resolve “urgent” issues, that we forget to step back and analyse whether what we’re doing is working or not. In the long run, this would lead to resources being exhausted and negative decision-making affected by fear and a lack of evidence.

Practicing Factfulness

This chapter outlined the authors’ suggestions on how to integrate “factfulness” in our daily life. This includes educational institutions sharing updated information on important global facts instead of relying on general assumptions and cultural stereotypes to learn about other countries, businesses looking beyond the richest countries and looking for potential investment opportunities elsewhere, and for organizations around the world to encourage factful thinking on a country-level, just as the book has done on a global scale.

Aside from those, other notable chapters include “The ‘Straight Line’ Instinct and “The Negativity Instinct”. The authors refer to the “straight line instinct” as our tendency to assume trends will progressively follow a straight curve without actually understanding the trends from one data to the next. Meanwhile, the chapter on The Negativity Instinct is interesting because it provides graphs on improvements we tend to have negative perceptions on, such as crime rates.

Critiques and Caveats to Consider

Despite the book’s well-intended message and its usage of easy-to-understand language, there are a few critiques and caveats to consider, both in regard to the content and style.

Firstly, the book’s cited sources are mainly from the United Nations. While the United Nations could be considered a credible source of information, this may mean that the authors potentially missed out on details which were included in regionally or nationally-sourced databases. Furthermore, even though the book displays many graphs and numbers which indicate the world is improving in some aspects, it doesn’t explain how we were able to achieve that progress. For instance, it displays data that access to education for girls has improved, but the strategies, policies, and efforts which contributed to that success are not explained by the authors. Thirdly, the cultural biases that the authors referenced in the book are more relevant to readers living in the west, drawing from the authors’ own backgrounds. Lastly, the book doesn’t provide detailed information on specific topics. Other critiques include the book employing an over-simplistic worldview and not discussing serious challenges enough (Berggren, 2018). Even though the authors wrote that there are problems which we need to address, the book emphasizes heavily on good aspects, which could lead readers to think that the book promotes a positivity bias.

In terms of writing style, the authors’ tone could be perceived as forceful to some readers. Furthermore, even though the contents are divided into different parts, some of the messages are redundantly repeated across the chapters. On the other hand, the part of the book which explained urgent issues that deserve our special attention was considerably brief. In that section, the authors described their problem analysis and suggested solutions briefly based on their personal opinions, even though it would have been interesting for them to provide a more in-depth analysis.

Despite these caveats, the book provides an interesting framework on how we can process information more critically when we are surrounded by news and social media updates which constantly relay the message that the world is worsening. The book’s simple language also makes this accessible for the public, and it’s particularly well-suited for individuals looking for a fresh perspective that is supported by well-sourced evidence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main message of Factfulness is that there’s a lot we still need to do to make the world better for everyone, but it would be wrong to say that we have not made progress. In fact, it should give us hope to know that the little and big things we’ve done have led us to important contributions being brought to the world. A key takeaway from the book is that we should be both critical yet hopeful, because we are able to make more accurate and meaningful contributions when we’re not acting on personal biases, negativity, and fear.

In terms of practicality, this book is better suited for the general public. However, it also invites experts, activists, and other people whose works influence the field of policy to consider these important questions: are we really viewing the world objectively, or have we been so used to consuming negative news that we are clouded by our pessimism? Are we causing unnecessary panic to raise urgency about certain matters instead of educating the public about the proper facts? Have we taken the time to review what does and doesn’t work so that our progress can be sustainable?

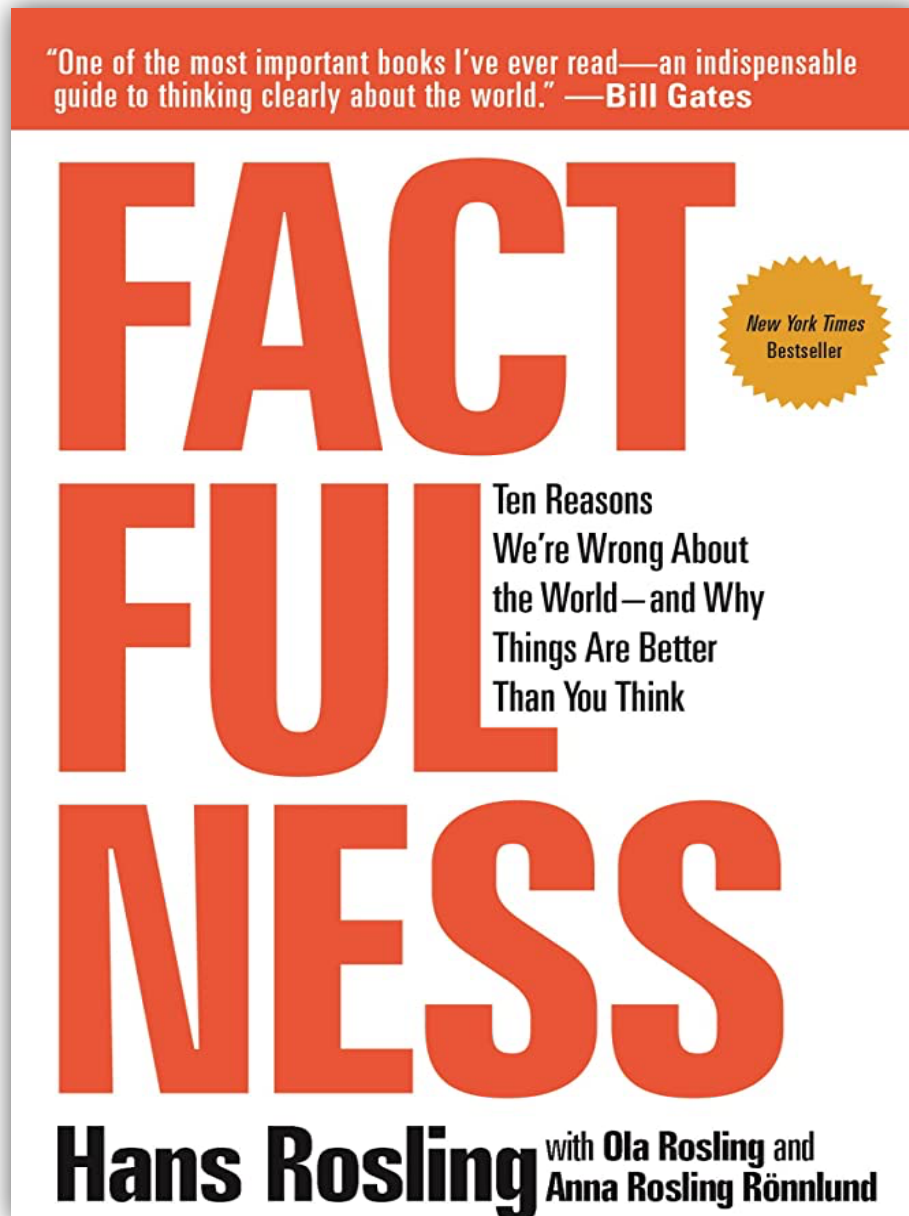
Book Rating

With all its positive aspects and critiques combined, I would give this book a 7 out of 10. The book provides a refreshing point of view which we are not frequently exposed to, which the authors supported

through test results, data, and personal experience. Nevertheless, readers should still conduct their own additional research and conduct fact checks to cross-reference whether the data in the book is still relevant.

For additional reference, readers could also check the Gapminder platform which the authors co-founded. Even though Factfulness has already been published, the Gapminder website is frequently updated, and they have a special segment dedicated to providing data about the 17 sustainable development goals (Gapminder, 2023).

Book Cover



Reference

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