



## On Rutger Bregman's Humankind: Optimism For Realists, Or, Neither Hobbes Nor Rousseau

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**A**bstract: This essay is a critical study of Rutger Bregman's 2020 book, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, from a broadly Kantian point of view. I present and defend the main points and arguments of the book, and on that basis, articulate a doctrine in social and political philosophy, which I call realistic-optimist dignitarian humanism, aka RODH, that I think captures the essence of what Bregman is driving at. Among its various theoretical and practical virtues, RODH gets constructively and creatively between Hobbes's excessive pessimism about human nature on the one hand, and Rousseau's unrealistic optimism about human nature on the other.

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**I**ntroduction: Rutger Bregman’s *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (Bregman, 2020) is a brilliant book. It’s beautifully written and translated (from Bregman’s native Dutch); it’s clearly and cogently argued in a way that artfully and colloquially disguises the highly creative, heavy-duty thinking that went into its composition; it’s chock full of concrete historical examples and contemporary references, and other cases-in-point; and above all, it’s philosophically game-changing, existentially and morally life-changing, and socially and politically world-changing.

Humankind contains four core theses.

First, human nature is substantially better than most people think it is, even though, as “human, all too human,” we are still infinitely far from being angelic, ideally rational, or morally perfect, and indeed we are built out of what Immanuel Kant so aptly called “the crooked timber of humanity, [from which] nothing straight can ever be made” (Kant, 1784/2007: p. 113, Ak 8: 23).

Second, the roughly 400-year-old and exceptionally widespread cognitive myth that human animals are inherently egoistic and mutually antagonistic “biochemical puppets,” “moist robots,” or “survival machines” (see essay #1 above, section 5), delivered as hegemonic ideology, and encoded into massively most of our leading contemporary social institutions, actually primes and shapes us into feeling, thinking, and acting like egoistic and mutually antagonistic biochemical puppets/moist robots/survival machines.

Third, coercive authoritarians of all kinds, demagogues and tyrants of all kinds, and big-capitalist manipulators and scientific technocrats, fully aligned with complicit ambitious, careerist scientists who pose as “masters of the universe,” all have a heavy vested self-interest in updating, recycling, spreading, and sustaining this 400-year-old cognitive myth.

And fourth, finally, and inspirationally, our clearly recognizing and fully internalizing the honest-to-goodness truth of the first three

theses is not only personally liberating, but also of immense emancipatory moral, social, and political value for the future of humankind.

In lucidly formulating and compellingly arguing for these four equally realistic and optimistic theses, Bregman's book builds on and extends a deeply important but often skeptically deprecated, depreciated, and dismissed historico-philosophical and sociopolitical tradition that runs from Immanuel Kant's 1793 *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and William Godwin's 1793 *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, to Peter Kropotkin's 1892 *Conquest of Bread* and 1902 *Mutual Aid*, via Oscar Wilde's 1891 "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," and Emma Goldman's writings of the 1910s and 20s, through Bertrand Russell's practical and political writings from the end of the First World War and into the 1960s, Paulo Freire's 1968/1970 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Murray Bookchin's writings from the 1960s to the 1990s, and more recent works like Rebecca Solnit's 2009 *A Paradise Built in Hell*,

Bregman's own 2014 *Utopia for Realists*, and James C. Scott's 2017 *Against the Grain*. Just to give it an accurate and handy name, but also with a full recognition of the heavy taboo associated with these words, let's call this the cosmopolitan anarcho-socialist tradition (Hanna, 2018: esp. parts 2-3, 2023a, 2023b).

But if that heavy taboo is too heavy for you, then please call it the realistic-optimist dignitarian humanist tradition instead, aka the RODH tradition. It is a bit of a mouthful, but it's accurate, and in all likelihood neither it nor its acronym triggers involuntary, taboo-driven feelings of fear-&-loathing. The RODH tradition fully rejects coercive authoritarianism of all kinds, on the basis of sufficient respect for universal and inherent human dignity, and it fully affirms both individual creativity and freedom, as well as social cooperation and solidarity, while also fully realistically recognizing that we are always and everywhere only "human, all-too-human," and "crooked timbers."

What accounts for all the fear-&-loathing aimed at the RODH

tradition? The plain historical fact is, that over the last 250 years this tradition has had to contend not only with the cataclysmic, catastrophic, and above all world-warping intellectual, cultural, moral, social, and political effects of: the rise of advanced or late capitalism; the scientific revolutions of Darwinian evolutionary theory, Einsteinian relativity theory, and Bohrian quantum mechanics; the rise of militarism and World War I; the rise of fascism and World War II, The Cold War and its military-industrial complex; and the spiralling rise and depredations of scientific, climate-changing, digitally-driven neoliberalism. But also and perhaps above all, the RODH tradition has had to contend with the profoundly hypnotic influence and cognitive myth-making power of the writings of two early modern philosophers in the 120 years immediately prior to Kant: Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, aka Mr We're-Fundamentally-Bad and Mr We're-Fundamentally-Good respectively So that is where I will go next, before I

sketch the basic details of Humankind.

### **Mr We're-Fundamentally-Bad versus Mr We're-Fundamentally-Good: Two False Conceptions of Human Nature, Morality, Society, Politics, and Almost Everything**

Let's suppose, as a minimal starting point, that healthy, normal human animals are conscious, self-conscious, and emotional (desiring, feeling, and passionate), but also at least minimally rational animals, in that they possess a capacity for logical and practical reasoning, but not in the sense that they always or even usually use that capacity properly or successfully. On the contrary, they very often abuse or misuse that rational capacity by often exercising it improperly or unsuccessfully, all-too-frequently catastrophically, sometimes tragically, and sometimes near-satanically.

As the English Civil War subsided, and at the very moment of the contemporaneous dual emergence of modern capitalism and the modern coercive authoritarian State (no

mere coincidence, that—see, e.g., Anderson, 1979: esp. part I), Hobbes wrote and published a brilliant, breakthrough book, his 1651 Leviathan (Hobbes, 1651/1968: esp. the

Introduction by C.B. McPherson, pp. 9-63) that is equally a treatise in materialist or physicalist metaphysics and a treatise on the foundations of politics.



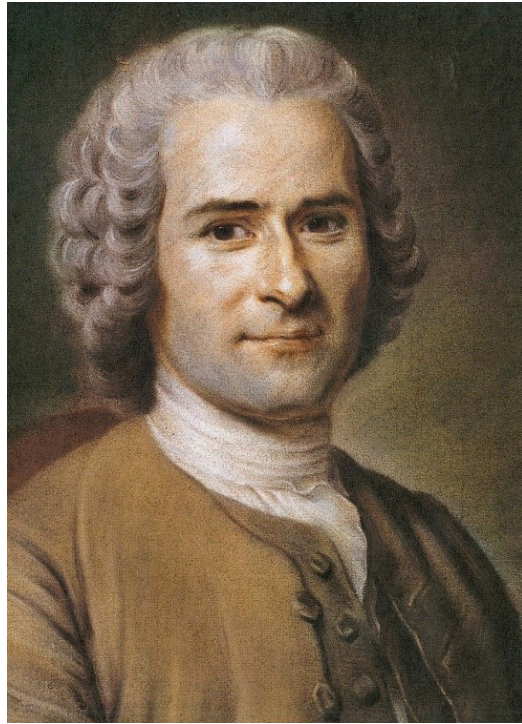
**A detail from the engraved title page of Hobbes's Leviathan (1651)**

More specifically, Hobbes argues that rational human animals are (i) inherently egoistic (i.e., self-interested) and mutually antagonistic puppets/robots/machines, and that therefore (ii) we not only collectively require but also desperately need to be—and in fact have actually or implicitly mutually agreed to be—“personated” and commanded by a coercive authoritarian

“Leviathan,” an absolute yet (instrumentally) rational sovereign (ideally a single tyrant, but possibly also a sovereign assembly), impersonally governing and threatening all the other people, in order (iii) to make it possible for us mutually, relentlessly, and robotically to pursue our individual self-interest, unhindered by others’ slings, arrows, and swords, so that (iv)

we can forever avoid catastrophically and tragically falling back into the chaotic “war of all against all” in the

pre-civilized, pre-political “state of nature.” Let’s call the conjunction of these four theses The Hobbesian Myth.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

A century or so later, however, in the run-up to the French Revolution in 1789, Rousseau asserted (spread out over various writings—see, e.g., Bertram, 2020) in a sharply contrariwise way, that rational human animals are (i) not only not nothing but puppets/robots/machines, but are also, at least in the state of nature, inherently free,

inherently good in that we are not inherently bad in Hobbes’s sense and also inherently possessed of the “natural virtue” of pity and some other “noble” virtues, yet catastrophically and tragically, (ii) we are inevitably corrupted by civilization and society, whereby (iii) we fall into a decadent and functionally Hobbesian condition of egoism

and mutual antagonism, and therefore (iv) we require to be governed by what is effectively the same coercive authoritarian Leviathan-regime that Hobbes had described, although this time around it is not a single person who plays the role of sovereign, but instead explicitly a sovereign representative assembly, (v) that is constituted and implemented by means of a "social contract" expressing the "general will" of all the people governed by it. So somewhat paradoxically, Rousseau was on the one hand an extreme, unrealistic optimist about human nature, and on the other hand, also an extreme, unrealistic cynic or pessimist about civilization/society. Correspondingly, let's call this paradoxical combination of extreme, unrealistic optimism about human nature and extreme, unrealistic cynicism/pessimism about civilization/society, The Rousseau-ian Myth.

Now the RODH tradition thinks that Hobbes was dead wrong that rational human animals are inherently egoistic and mutually antagonistic moist robots, and therefore he was equally dead wrong that we

either require to be governed by or have somehow actually or implicitly already collectively agreed to be governed by, a coercive authoritarian Leviathan, aka the State and other State-like social institutions. On the contrary, it is the coercive authoritarian Leviathan itself, namely the State and other State-like social institutions, that prime and shape us into feeling, thinking, and acting like egoistic and mutually antagonistic puppets/robots/machines.

So if the RODH tradition is correct that Hobbes was dead wrong twice, then Hobbes's first two claims are flat-out incorrect; and since Hobbes's third and fourth claims depend entirely on the first two claims, they are at best unproven. But if the RODH tradition is also correct that in fact it's the coercive authoritarian Leviathan, namely the State and other State-like social institutions, themselves that are the primary causal source of whatever egoistic, mutually antagonistic, and robotic tendencies we display, then The Hobbesian Myth is not only false, it is also damnably false. Still, to give Hobbes his due, he

was indeed absolutely correct that the State, as such, no matter how its government is constituted and implemented, just is a coercive authoritarian Leviathan.

Nevertheless Rousseau, generally speaking, was less wrong than Hobbes, because at least Rousseau correctly rejected the thesis that we are nothing but puppets/ robots/ machines, and also because he correctly recognized that certain kinds of civilization/social institutions do prime and shape us in ways that are inherently deforming and destructive. Yet Rousseau was still quite wrong that we were inherently non-bad and naturally virtuous in the state of nature (in fact, we are no more inherently non-bad and naturally virtuous in the state of nature than we are inherently bad and naturally vicious in the state of nature), and also wrong that civilization/social institutions inevitably corrupt us (in fact, although they sometimes corrupt us, they do not inevitably do so, and sometimes they even have a precisely contrary effect on us). So The Rousseau-ian Myth is

false, although not damnably false.

Doubly on the contrary to The Hobbesian Myth and The Rousseau-ian Myth—i.e., doubly on the contrary to Mr We're-Fundamentally-Bad and Mr We're-Fundamentally-Good—what the RODH tradition thinks is actually true, is fourfold.

First, rational human animals are essentially capable of good actions and virtuous character, cooperation, and altruism, but also (sadly, tragically) equally essentially capable of bad actions and vicious character, antagonism, and egoism. So we are neither fundamentally-bad nor fundamentally-good, but instead, complementarily and inherently partially-good-and-partially-bad. We are, indeed, crooked timbers: never perfectly straight, but also necessarily such that there is some genuinely good wood in us too.

Second, it's only coercive authoritarian social institutions that inevitably corrupt us, and are inherently deforming and destructive for us, especially including the State, but also any other State-like institution.

Third, directly contrary to and mutually exclusive of those inherently deforming and destructive coercive authoritarian social institutions, whether States or other State-like social institutions, there are at least some social institutions (and in fact, surprisingly more of them than you might initially think) that are neither coercive nor authoritarian, hence they are neither inherently destructive nor inherently deforming, but on the contrary they can effectively prime and shape our capacities for good, cooperation, and altruism, in ways that are inherently constructive and enabling for us (Maiese and Hanna, 2019). Following Kant's lead (see the texts quoted two paragraphs below), let's call these constructive, enabling social institutions ethical communities.

Fourth, therefore, all of these non-coercive, non-authoritarian, inherently constructive and enabling social institutions—ethical communities—are not States or State-like social institutions, since all States and State-like social institutions are inherently coercive and authoritarian; or if

ethical communities do happen to arise and exist temporarily inside the State or other State-like social institutions, then they're explicitly or at least implicitly in opposition to the State and those other State-like institutions.

Kant and Kropotkin, contrariwise to Hobbes and Rousseau, explicitly asserted all four of these claims. Here, for example, is what Kant wrote in a book that is exceptionally misleadingly and stodgily entitled *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (as if Shakespeare had called his play *Danish Melancholia Within the Boundaries of Mere Tragedy*, instead of *Hamlet*):

### **I. Concerning the Ethical State of Nature**

A juridico-civil (political) state is the relation of human beings to each other inasmuch as they stand jointly under public juridical laws (which are all coercive laws). An ethico-civil state is one in which they are united under laws without being coerced, i.e., under laws of virtue alone.

Now, just as the rightful (but not therefore always righteous) state of nature, i.e. the juridical

state of nature, is opposed to the first, so is the ethical state of nature distinguished from the second. In these two [states of nature] each individual prescribes the law to himself, and there is no external law to which he, along with the others, acknowledges himself to be subject. In both each individual is his own judge, and there is no effective public authority with power to determine legitimately, according to laws, what is in given cases the duty of each individual, and to bring about the universal execution of those laws.

In an already existing political community all the political citizens are, as such, still in the ethical state of nature, and have the right to remain in it; for it would be a contradiction (in adjecto) for the political community to compel its citizens to enter into an ethical community, since the latter entails freedom from coercion in its very concept. Every political community may indeed wish to have available a dominion over minds as well, according to the laws of virtue; for where its means of coercion do not reach, since a human judge cannot penetrate into the

depths of other human beings, there the dispositions to virtue would bring about the required result. But woe to the legislator who would want to bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends! For he would thereby not only achieve the very opposite of ethical ends, but also undermine his political ends and render them insecure. —The citizen of the political community therefore remains, so far as the latter's lawgiving authority is concerned, totally free: he may wish to enter with his fellow citizens into an ethical union over and above the political one, or rather remain in a natural state of this sort. Only insofar as an ethical community must rest on public laws and have a constitution based on them, must those who freely commit themselves to enter into this state, not [indeed] allow the political power to command them how to order (or not order) such a constitution internally, but allow limitations, namely the condition that nothing be included in this constitution which contradicts the duty of its members as citizens of the state—even though, if the ethical bond is of the genuine

sort, this condition need not cause anxiety.

## **II. The Human Being Ought to Leave the Ethical State of Nature in Order to Become a Member of An Ethical Community**

Just as the juridical state of nature is a state of war of every human being against every other, so too is the ethical state of nature one in which the good principle, which resides in each human being, is incessantly attacked by the evil which is found in him and in every other as well. Human beings (as we remarked above) mutually corrupt one another's moral predisposition and, even with the good will of each individual, because of the lack of a principle which unites them, they deviate through their dissensions from the common goal of goodness, as though they were instruments of evil, and expose one another to the danger of falling once again under its dominion.

Further, just as the state of a lawless external (brutish) freedom and independence from coercive laws is a state of injustice and of war, each against each, which a human

being ought to leave behind in order to enter into a politico-civil state, so is the ethical state of nature a public feuding between the principles of virtue and a state of inner immorality which the natural human being ought to endeavor to leave behind as soon as possible.

Now, here we have a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself. For every species of rational beings is objectively—in the idea of reason—destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all. But, since this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end, toward a system of well-disposed human beings in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass, yet the idea of such a whole, as a universal republic based on the laws of virtue, differs entirely from all moral laws (which concern what we know to reside within our power), for it is the

idea of working toward a whole of which we cannot know whether as a whole it is also in our power: so the duty in question differs from all others in kind and in principle. —We can already anticipate that this duty will need the presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect.

### **iii. The Concept of An Ethical Community Is the Concept of a People of God Under Ethical Laws**

If an ethical community is to come into being, all individuals must be subjected to a public legislation, and all the laws binding them must be capable of being regarded as commands of a common lawgiver. Now if the community to be founded is to be a juridical one, the mass of people joining in a union must itself be the lawgiver (of constitutional laws), because legislation proceeds from the principle of limiting the freedom of each to the conditions under which it can coexist with the freedom of

everyone else, in conformity with a universal law, and the universal will thus establishes an external legal constraint. If, however, the community is to be an ethical one, the people, as a people, cannot itself be regarded as legislator. For in such a community all the laws are exclusively designed to promote the morality of actions (which is something internal, and hence cannot be subject to public human laws) whereas these public laws (and in this they constitute a juridical community) are on the contrary directed to the legality of actions, which is visible to the eye, and not to (inner) morality which alone is at issue here. There must therefore be someone other than the people whom we can declare the public lawgiver of an ethical community.

But neither can ethical laws be thought of as proceeding originally merely from the will of this superior (as statutes that would not be binding without his prior sanction), for then they would not be ethical laws, and the duty commensurate to them would not be a free virtue but an externally enforceable legal duty. Therefore only such a one

can be thought of as the supreme lawgiver of an ethical community, with respect to whom all true duties, hence also the ethical, ... must be represented as at the same time his commands; consequently, he must also be one who knows the heart, in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions. But this is the concept of God as a moral ruler of the world. Hence an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. as a people of God, and indeed in accordance with the laws of virtue. (Kant, 1792: part 3, division 1, sections I-III, at pp. 130-134, Ak 6: 95-102)

And here is what Kropotkin wrote in two books far more non-misleadingly and non-stodgily entitled *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* and *Mutual Aid*:

For the success of socialism, the ideas of no-government, of self-reliance, of free initiative of the individual—of anarchism, in a word—had ... to be preached side by side with

those of socialized ownership and production.... There is in [human]kind, a nucleus of social habits—an inheritance from the past not yet duly appreciated—which is not maintained by coercion and is superior to coercion. Upon it all the progress of [human]kind is based. (Kropotkin, 1899/1971: p. 401)

[N]either the crushing powers of the centralized State nor the teachings of mutual hatred and pitiless struggle which came, adorned with the attributes of science, from obliging philosophers and sociologists, could weed out the feeling of human solidarity, deeply lodged in men's understanding and heart, because it has been nurtured by all our preceding evolution. What was the outcome of evolution since its earliest stages cannot be overpowered by one of the aspects of that same evolution. And the need of mutual aid and support which had lately taken refuge in the narrow circle of the family, or the slum neighbours, in the village, or the secret union of workers, re-asserts itself again, even in our modern society, and claims its rights to be, as it always has

been, the chief leader towards further progress. (Kropotkin, 1902: ch. 8)

So what the RODH tradition is saying, is that the true view of human nature, morality, society, politics, and everything, is neither Hobbesian cynicism/pessimism about human nature + coercive authoritarianism about civilization/society, nor Rousseau-ian extreme, unrealistic optimism about human nature + extreme, unrealistic cynicism/pessimism about civilization/society, but instead Kantian and Kropotkin-ian realistic-optimist dignitarian humanism.

Now it's time to sketch some of the nitty-gritty (actually, highly nifty-nongritty) basic details of Humankind.

## **Go(o)d is in the Details**

If someone set you the task of proving a highly controversial thesis about human nature, morality, civilization/society, and politics, how would you go about doing it? Bregman's canny and highly effective two-part methodology is (i) to apply the philosopher's everyday

tools of conceptual analysis and critical thinking, especially including what are sometimes called debunking arguments, to a series of real-world historical, recent, and contemporary case-studies, each of which has been an important contributor to the hegemonic ideology of The Hobbesian Myth, and then (ii) to lay out, in direct opposition to each of the debunked contributors to the Myth, a contrary and countervailing set of well-researched, well-supported real-world historical and contemporary case-studies appealing to cognitive-scientific, natural-scientific, or social-scientific evidence.

For example, in the Prologue, Bregman uses the well-known true story of ordinary British people's admirable response to The Blitz during World War II, together with an equally true but less well-known (or conveniently forgotten) story about the morally terrible British decision to terror-bomb German civilians from 1944 until the end of the war, in order to make the crucial point that the Hobbesian thesis that our essentially bad nature is covered over by a flimsy veneer of civilization, which, if tested

by any sort of crisis or disaster, is stripped away as we automatically regress to a chaotic “war of all against all,” is not only empirically false, but also, if it is uncritically believed or internalized, leads to morally terrible choices and actions.

As everyone knows, The Blitz not only did not break down British morale, it actually strengthened it. Moreover, [s]hortly 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 [of civilians]. 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. Between 1940 and 1944, ... 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. (H: p. xvii)

Bregman then cogently remarks that

[w]hat 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 [Churchill's chief advisor about bombing German civilians]—all of them signed on to [the] 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 they bombed, the thicker it got.... 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. 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. (H: p. xviii)

In other words, not only is the Hobbesian thesis that rational human animals are essentially egoistic and mutually antagonistic simply false as an empirical claim. But also and perhaps even more importantly, under the worst conditions of

crisis and disaster, we very frequently choose and act in a way that is very morally good, i.e., in a very altruistic, cooperative, and actively dignity-respecting way: therefore we are fully capable of altruistic, cooperative, dignity-respecting choices and actions under any conditions (see also Solnit, 2009). Moreover, and most insidiously, the hegemonic ideology of The Hobbesian Myth effectively serves the self-interest of coercive authoritarians and other manipulative elites, by priming and shaping us to be egoistic, uncooperative, and actively disrespectful of human dignity—in a word, very bad or even downright evil, in ways that can be easily controlled, and also provide big pay-offs for the controllers.

Bregman says right at the outset that the “radical idea” of his book is simply “that most people, deep down, are pretty decent” (H: p. 2). If true, then that Bregmanian counter-thesis directly undermines that crucial part of The Hobbesian Myth which says that we are fundamentally bad, i.e., inherently egoistic and mutually antagonistic, when we

understand Bregman’s counter-thesis more explicitly as the claim that, provided we are sane and minimally healthy, we are all inherently capable of good choices and actions.

But actually, Bregman’s radical idea also has a second part that is equally important, which is that “if we believe most people can’t be trusted, that’s how we’ll treat each other, to everyone’s detriment” (H: p. 9). Now it has been empirically well-confirmed, and is widely known, that the placebo effect is how a false belief can induce positive medical effects. But it has been empirically well confirmed, although fewer studies have focused on it, and fewer people are aware of it, that there is also nocebo effect, which is how a false belief can induce negative medical effects. For example, if you’re in a position of medical authority and you tell people who drink Coca-Cola that it will make them sick, then many of those Coke-drinking people will actually get sick (H: pp. 7-9). Generalized to morality, civilization/society, and politics, The Hobbesian Myth is the ultimate nocebo: “our grim view of humanity is also a

nocebo” (H: 9). Moreover, this nocebo has been relentlessly delivered to us not only by the news and the media more generally, via the digital-industrial complex (H: pp. 13-15), but also and perhaps most importantly, by both classical and contemporary famous, high-status natural, social scientists, and philosophers alike, not to mention religious sages, leaders, and fundamentalists of all stripes (H: pp. 16-19). To riff on a classic David Bowie ditty, all the young and old dudes carry the Hobbesian news. So in order to recognize and internalize the first part of Bregman’s radical idea, we also have to recognize and internalize its second part, and thereby liberate ourselves from the ultimate nocebo of The Hobbesian Myth.

Furthermore, it cannot be overstated how powerful are the forces allied against Bregman’s two-part radical idea:

[f]irst, 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....Second, to stand up for human goodness is to take a stand against the powers that be. For the powerful, a hopeful view of humanity is downright threatening. Subversive. Seditious. It implies that we’re not selfish beasts that need to be reined in and regulated. It implies we need a different kind of leadership....Third, to stand up for human goodness means weathering a storm of ridicule. You’ll be called naïve. Obtuse. Any weakness in your reasoning will be mercilessly exposed. (H: pp. 19-20)

Yes, yes, and yes again. They will relentlessly contradict and criticize you, fear you and loathe you, and mock you and name-shame/troll you—all for arguing and saying that rational human animals are inherently capable of altruism, cooperation, and dignitarian choice and action. How crazy and ironic is that? So Bregman and all those who share Bregman’s views, including Kant, Kropotkin, myself, and everyone else in the RODH tradition, certainly have our work cut out for us.

From this point onwards, Bregman successively and successfully applies his two-part methodology, especially including debunking arguments, to an impressively large series of Hobbesian Myth-making case-studies, including William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (H: pp. 22- 33), Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*, (H: pp. 53-72), Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (H: pp. 74-91), the mystery of Easter Island (H: pp. 114-134), Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment and Muzafer Sherif's Robbers Cave Experiment (H: pp. 140-157), Stanley Milgram's blind obedience study (H: pp. 160-178), the Kitty Genovese case (pp. 180-194), "the mystery of the Nazi mind" and other "killing-machine" ideologies like recent Islamic terrorism and US military training techniques since the Korean War (pp. 202-221), Machiavelli and Machiavellian ideas about the psychology of power more generally (H: pp. 224-239), the ideas of Hume, Adam Smith, and of many other Enlightenment Hobbes-inspired thinkers (but not Kant) about human nature, morality,

civilization/ society, and politics more generally (H: pp. 242-250), Frederic Taylor and Taylorism about the science of management (H: pp. 264-278), Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" (pp. 306-317), and James Q. Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* and the closely-related "broken windows strategy" in policing (H: pp. 333-346).

Assuming now that The Hobbesian Myth is indeed damnably false, and that we have also clearly recognized and fully internalized that realization, then how should we transform our lives, and what is to be done?

Bregman concretely and constructively proposes (i) re-thinking the nature of education and work in order to ground them on the assumption of intrinsic motivation, and directly reconnecting them with our inherent capacity for play (H: pp. 263-295), (ii) direct or participatory democracy (H: pp. 298-317), (iii) a radical reorganization of policing and criminal justice systems (H: pp. 321- 346), and (iv) the universal application of principled negotiation—i.e., win-win—strategies (see also Fisher and

Ury, 2011) for resolving any and all moral, social, and political conflicts grounded on “hate, injustice, and prejudice” (H: pp. 348-378). And although Bregman does not explicitly argue for them in this book, as he did in *Utopia for Realists*, we should also add: (v) a truly generous universal basic income, (vi) universal open borders, and (vii) a 15-hour workweek (see also Hanna, 2018: part 3, 2023a, 2023b; Maiese and Hanna, 2019: esp. chs. 2, 6, and 7).

By way of an epilogue, Bregman ends *Humankind* with an exceptionally helpful list of “Ten Rules to Live By” (H: pp. 381-397):

- I: When in doubt, assume the best
- II: Think in win-win scenarios
- III: Ask more questions
- IV: Temper your empathy, train your compassion
- V: Try to understand the other, even if you don't get where they're coming from
- VI: Love your own as others love their own
- VII: Avoid the news
- VIII: Don't punch Nazis
- IX: Come out of the closet: don't be ashamed to do good
- X: Be Realistic.

I won't unpack the precise meanings and implications of these rules here—although I do draw your attention particularly to Rule VII; but suffice it to say, that anyone who internalized and conscientiously followed them would really and truly be a (gentle) RODH-warrior.

## Conclusion

As far as I can see, all things considered, Bregman has made only two small mistakes in *Humankind*.

His first small mistake is to say, or at least strongly imply, that it's Rousseau's position that he is actually defending (see, e.g., H: pp. 43-47, 102-104). Unfortunately, that impression leaves *Humankind* open to all the obvious objections to Rousseau's views in particular, and to unrealistically optimistic, or Pollyanna-ish, views about human nature more generally. But as we have seen, since Bregman's fully developed and unpacked view is in fact equally anti-Hobbesian and anti-Rousseau-ian—precisely because it is in fact a RODH-ian view, just like Kant's and Kropotkin's—then this small

mistake is merely one of a slightly over-simplified, and perhaps also slightly bowdlerized, presentational rhetoric.

And Bregman's second small mistake is that his "Ten Rules to Live By," merely by virtue of being a tenfold list of moral recommendations, involuntarily and unfortunately reminds us of The Ten Commandments, a supposedly God-issued classic expression of coercive authoritarianism writ large, indeed cosmically large. So in order to avoid that involuntary, unfortunate association of ideas, and also for some other reasons, one of which is just that I like prime numbers, I would also like to add an eleventh rule to live by, that I will call "The Ikiru Rule" (so-named, of course, for Akira Kurosawa's brilliant 1952 film, *Ikiru*, i.e., "To Live"):

XI: No matter how bad and sinful you have already been, nevertheless you are always inherently better than the worst thing you have ever done, precisely because, provided that you are still sane and at least minimally healthy, it is always really possible for you to undertake what Kant called a

"revolution of the heart" or "revolution of the will," thereby achieving existential-moral redemption.

In other words: provided that you're still sane and at least minimally healthy, you can always choose to feel, think, and act in a radically life-changing and radically world-changing way, for the better. You really can do it. You can. But please do not put it off for too long, because inevitably you are going to die, and then it's too damned late.

At the end of the philosophical day, however, these two small mistakes are at most sidebar quibbles about Bregman's presentational rhetoric. And as I asserted at the outset, *Humankind* is a brilliant book. So I cannot recommend too strongly that you obtain a copy, read it very carefully, think long and hard about it, and then wholeheartedly go for its four core theses, as well as the four core theses of the realistic-optimist dignitarian humanist tradition, Bregman's ten rules to live by, and The Ikiru Rule, which add up to eleven existential rules altogether. Before it's too damned late.

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