

# Book Review - Factfulness : Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World...

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## Abstract

Whether researchers, teachers, corporate managers, philanthropists, or leaders of social organizations, our role requires us to make decisions that influence others. Hence, we have a responsibility to base our decisions on an unbiased view of the world around us. Unfortunately and unknown to us, our minds are wired to see things differently than they truly are. If you are like us, you'll want to correct this situation. Rosling's work, and particularly this book, has very significantly changed the way we perceive the world and we will be surprised if the book does not have the same effect on you.

About the Author, Hans Rosling (1948–2017) :

- Medical doctor, professor of international health, and renowned public educator.
- Adviser to the World Health Organization and UNICEF.
- Cofounded Médecins Sans Frontières in Sweden and the Gapminder Foundation.
- TED talks with over 35 million views.
- Time magazine's 100 Most Influential List.

**Keywords :** factfulness, human instincts, future of society, macro-economics, population, education, health, welfare

**JEL Classification :** F01, I00, 01

**Book Review Submission Date :** November 7, 2019 ; **Book Review sent back for Revision :** November 25, 2019 ; **Book Review Acceptance Date :** November 27, 2019



**Author :** Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund

**Published :** By Factfulness AB in 2018

**ISBN :** 978-1-250-10781-7 (Hardcover)

**Pages :** 342

**Price :** ₹ 499 in India

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**DOI :** 10.17010/pijom/2019/v12i12/149272

**W**hether researchers, teachers, corporate managers, philanthropists, or leaders of social organizations, we make impactful decisions all the time and most of these are based on what we know about the world around us. But how much do we really know ?

We think we are 'Factful' most of the time, but...

In 2017, 12,000 people in 14 countries answered a set of 13 questions (also provided in this book) that had three very distinct choices provided as answers. Surprisingly, they scored on an average only two out of the first 12 correctly (the 13<sup>th</sup> seemed more like a sanity checker). No one scored all correctly, one person got 11 of 12 right, and an astonishing 15% scored zero.

The questions were simple, for example, whether the number of deaths due to natural disasters had doubled, halved, or remained unchanged over the last 100 years.

Those with very poor scores included a group of Nobel Prize winners and a group of medical researchers. So, it appeared that it is not a question of intelligence or interest in the subject. Everyone seems to get the world devastatingly wrong. On an average, people scored worse than a chimpanzee would note that because there were three choices, random uneducated guesses should have given, on an average, 4 of 12 right. What's more, the chimps' errors would have been equally shared between the two wrong answers ; whereas, the human errors all tended to be in one direction. Every group of people thought that the world was more violent, more frightening, and more hopeless — in short, more dramatic than it truly is.

Rosling spent many years trying to “upgrade people's knowledge”; he developed better teaching materials that set out data more clearly — his famed animated bubble charts & graphs and large physical boxes. He took these to TED talks in many places, including Monterey, Berlin, and Cannes ; to the boardrooms of multinational corporations like Coca-Cola and IKEA ; to large global financial organizations ; and to the U.S. State Department. “But gradually, gradually, we came to realize...” that people misinterpret the facts even when they are right in front of them. Rosling concluded that people's over dramatic world view is not caused just by lack of knowledge, and it is not the fault of media, propaganda, or fake news. It is the result of how our brains are hard-wired from the days of our ancestors who, for their survival, needed to imagine the worst.

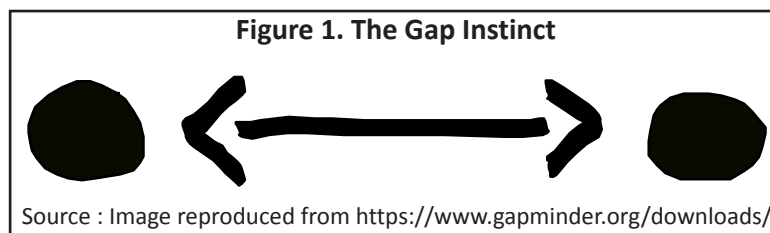
This book, written by Rosling in his last years and completed by his son Ola and daughter-in-law Anna, is about demonstrating to us, how little we know, why we know so little, and what we can do about it.

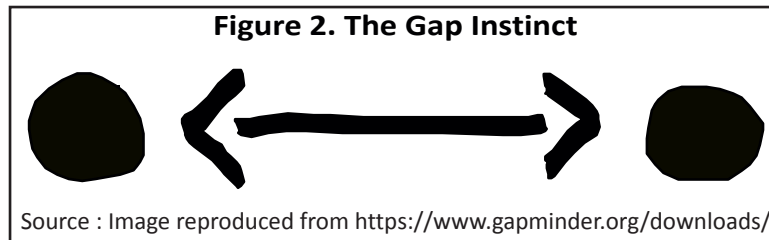
## **The Ten Instincts Responsible for Our Overdramatic Worldview**

The bulk of the book is devoted to the 10 instincts that, according to Rosling, prevent us from seeing the world the way it is. The first is the Gap Instinct (Figure 1).

It is our irresistible temptation to divide all kinds of things into two distinct groups, with an imagined gap. This is particularly true when it comes to people; we like to categorize people as rich or poor. We also categorize countries as developed and developing, and so on. The fact is that the majority of people (or countries or whatever else we categorize) is in the middle, or right in our imagined gap, like in Figure 2.

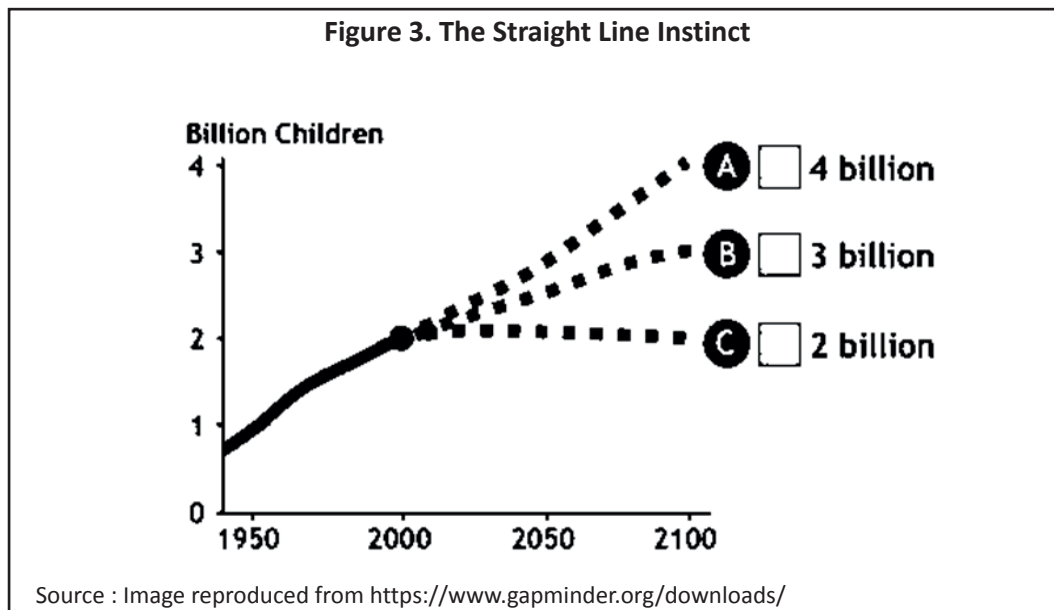
To control the gap instinct, Rosling recommends that we first look for the three warning signs that he explains. And then “look for the majority.”





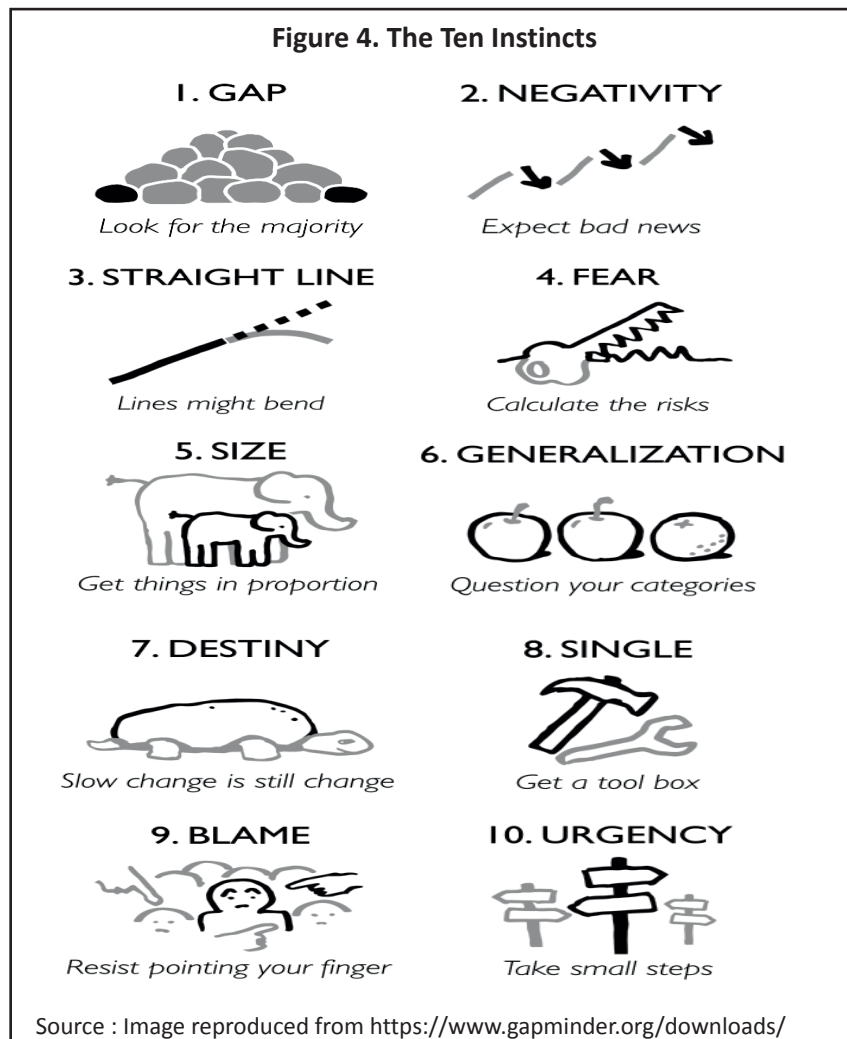
The Negativity Instinct is our tendency to notice the bad more than the good. We believe that things are getting worse in our world. While it is true that there are many bad things in this world, most aspects are in fact getting better. For example, in the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has almost halved. Average life expectancy has improved by more than 10 years in the last 50 years and now stands at 72 years. Rosling goes on to list another 32 very significant things about the world that have improved dramatically including HIV infection coming down from 549 per million to 241 in the last 20 years and child deaths before the age of 5 coming down to 4% from over 40% in 100 years. He also lists 16 good things that have increased significantly including crop yields, literacy, democracy, electricity, and water access. Rosling then lists three reasons for our negativity instinct and suggests that we should “expect bad news” as a way of controlling this instinct.

The third instinct described is the Straight-line Instinct (Figure 3) due to which we tend to extrapolate the future based on the past without taking cognizance of changes in underlying conditions. For example, in the graph below, most people are unlikely to choose option C, though it is the correct one.



Rosling suggests that we should familiarize ourselves with the different shapes that graphs come in and not assume straight lines. We should remind ourselves of common trends around us, like the rate of growth of a child. Imagine the height and weight of a person at the age of 20 years if she were to maintain the growth rate of her first six months after birth.

Rosling goes on to describe the 10 instincts in some detail, devoting a chapter of the book to each, and



shows what we can do to be 'factful.' In the 11th and concluding chapter, he describes how 'factfulness' can be used effectively in education, business, and journalism and in organizations or communities or just as an individual citizen.

He then summarizes the instincts and ways to overcome them in a chart with some easy to remember rules of thumb (Figure 4).

## Overall Impressions

Rosling's passion and commitment to make the world more 'factful,' as apparent from his years of work in this area, are also very evident in this book. His son Ola and daughter-in-law Anna describe in the "Outro" of the book what happened four days before Rosling passed away. When he was taken to the hospital, he took with him in the ambulance, printed copies of several chapters of the draft of the book with his scribbled notes. Over those last days, he discussed the draft with Ola from his hospital bed.

Rosling's ability to be humorous even when describing his own potentially fatal situations, the simplicity

with which he explains complex phenomena, and the conversational style of writing make this book enjoyable and easy to read.

If Rosling was still around, our suggestion to him would have been to include more examples of how educated people even in the not so developed countries have the same instincts, and hence, the same over-dramatic view of the world. Surely, the phenomenon is universal and Rosling, through all his travel and work around the world, would have known. Perhaps, this is something his co-authors can work on?

All the same, our world needs its researchers, teachers, corporate managers, philanthropists, and leaders of social organizations to be 'factful,' and this fantastic book will, we believe, help. If you still need some convincing — take the 2-minute test at the start of the book and you will want to read it.

## References

Gapminder. (n.d.). *Images*. Retrieved from <https://www.gapminder.org/downloads/>

### About the Authors

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