

# **Will Science and Reason Save Us?**

**The Liberal Left's False Wall of Defense**

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Lies on social media, life-threatening health advice, “alternative facts,” info wars, etc. It is easy to be concerned about the disregard for truthfulness, reflection, and sensibility involved in the far-right offensive that has entered government buildings around the world. Yet, it is also troubling that an increasing number of leftists embrace a neoliberal line of defense, hailing ideological notions of “science,” “reason,” and “rationalism.” This ignores decades of leftist critiques of such notions, formulated by thinkers with backgrounds as different as the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, and the theory of science.

The uncritical embrace of ideological notions of science, reason, and rationalism has been an integral part of patriarchal and colonial systems for centuries. It has been criticized by feminist and indigenous voices around the world. In the current debate, these voices must not be ignored. Said notions have brought us to where we find ourselves today, that is, at the brink of ecological, economic, and political collapse. Can we rely on them to save us? And even if they help contain the fascist threat, don’t we deserve better than the cementation of a patriarchal, Eurocentric tradition?

The figureheads of the science-reason-and-rationalism school hail from different disciplines. Let us look at three of them a little more closely: the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, the physician Hans Rosling, and the philosopher Peter Singer.

### ***Science: Richard Dawkins***

Richard Dawkins, who rose to fame with his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* has become a scientist rock star. He speaks to five-figure audiences, is the world’s most prominent atheist, and enjoys to comment on things he knows little about. In his home country, the United Kingdom, he endorses candidates of the Liberal Democrats. The Richard Dawkins Foundation promotes “scientific literacy and a secular worldview,” based on Dawkins conviction that science is “one of the highest and aesthetically most rewarding achievements of the human spirit.” In 2017, a comprehensive selection of lectures and articles by Dawkins appeared under the title *Science in the Soul: Selected Writings of a Passionate Rationalist*. The publisher announced it as a “timely, passionate defense of rational, scientific thinking.”

Dawkins attracts numerous hanger-ons, eager to bask in his glory. One of them is the physicist Lawrence Krauss, incidentally the receiver of the 2016 Richard Dawkins Award presented by the Atheist Alliance of America. In the 2013 documentary film *The Unbelievers*, Krauss marvels at the “poetry” of him debating a Muslim scholar in Canberra while Richard Dawkins faces off with an archbishop in Sydney. It makes for an odd understanding of poetry but might explain how Richard Dawkins can “love music, literature, poetry and the warmth, both mental and physical, of human affection,” while insisting that “emotion should know its place.” After all, “political decisions, decisions of state, policies for the future, should flow from clear-thinking, rational consideration.”

Philosophy does not live up to these standards. Says Dawkins: “Can you imagine a science department advertising for a new professor to cover ‘continental chemistry’? Or ‘the Eastern tradition in biology’? The very idea is a bad joke. That says something about the values of science and is not kind to those of philosophy.” That’s probably why Dawkins feels comfortable ignoring 2500 years of philosophical investigation into the meaning of truth, stating nonchalantly: “There is objective truth out there and it is our business to find it.” Interestingly enough, Dawkins de-

clares on his website that “my foundation promotes respect for people who hold critical thinking as a cherished personal value and use it in day-to-day life.” He seems to be no fan of leading by example.

Dawkins considers scientists to be very special people, engaged in the “most moral” and “most noble” of activities. Personal prestige is alien to them, as they are “proud to agree on what new evidence it would take to change their minds.” This, too, sounds like a joke, although not necessarily a bad one. To underline scientist righteousness, Dawkins relates that the pursuit of science “is not a way to get rich.” Luckily, there seem to be exceptions. Richard Dawkins, at least, doesn’t appear to be suffering materially for his love of truth. Thank God.

If Dawkins strikes you as an elitist, don’t worry: he’s fine with that. “Elitism,” to him, is “a terrible word, but maybe not such a terrible thing?” (Stress on *maybe*. – Note by the author.)

## ***Facts: Hans Rosling***

The Swedish physician Hans Rosling, who passed away in 2017, made a name for himself as an “edutainer.” Making statistics hip with the help of animated graphics, Rosling presentations became a hit in the 2000s, both live and online.

For Rosling, statistics is sacrosanct. He has paid lip-service to numbers having “their limits,” but insists that “if something is urgent and important, it should be measured.” It is “statistic agencies” that convey a “neutral and representative picture of the world.” Longstanding critiques of the limitations of statistics are ignored, even though they are commonly recognized by mainstream scholars, not just wacky radicals. Examples: Who collects the data? Is the World Bank, whose figures Rosling largely relies on, trustworthy? Are the national agencies trustworthy that the World Bank, in turn, relies on? How do they collect their data? What does income say about wealth? Does it make sense to divide the world’s people in four different income categories? How do you account for informal economies, which determine the lives of billions of people? Can “extreme poverty” or “hunger” ever be measured in numbers? What does it mean that a country is “democratic”? And so on.

*Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think* is Rosling’s posthumously published blockbuster. It is full of graphics that support his central thesis: the world is getting better by the day, and whoever questions that is an “alarmist,” espousing a “dramatic” worldview, as opposed to Rosling’s “fact-based” one.

Alarmists are driven by “instincts” and “irrational feelings.” They cannot see the world “as it is.” Fortunately, Rosling long ago embarked on a “lifelong fight against global misconceptions.” His heroes are driven by reason, such as “the brave barefoot woman, whose name I don’t know but whose rational arguments saved me from being sliced by a mob of angry men with machetes.” It’s reassuring to know that despite his opposition to a dramatic worldview, Rosling has no qualms about injecting a bit of drama into his autobiography. The barefoot woman, by the way – who, in Rosling’s estimation, had probably never left her home village in Congo and must have been illiterate – “was able to think critically and express herself with razor-sharp logic and perfect rhetoric.” Who would have thought?

When I first encountered Rosling, I wondered whether his arrogance was part of the show. Kinda like *Revenge of the Nerds* with an intellectual twist. I came to the conclusion that the arrogance was genuine. Rosling seemed to be as full of himself as he appeared to be. In *Factfulness*,

he talks about the relief in discovering that his students “knew less about the world than chimpanzees,” and he seemed to derive an almost freakish joy from people not knowing the statistics he cited, as if people have nothing better to do than memorize numbers. In an interview with a Danish news anchor asking critical questions, Rosling declared, “I am right and you are wrong.” There wasn’t a hint of irony.

Interestingly enough, Rosling has cited “humility” as an important character trait. But note his definition: “Being humble, here, means being aware of how difficult your instincts can make it to get the facts right.” This would imply that there no longer is a need to be humble once you do get the facts right (or, at least, believe you do). This, I suppose, explains Rosling’s behavior.

There are, of course, quite a few “facts” that dispute Rosling’s “fact-based” optimism:

- + Happiness is not dependent on material progress.
- + A growing gap between the rich and the poor is a problem even if it is because the rich are getting richer without the poor getting poorer (although many of them do).
- + Even if there are material gains among the poor, they remain dependent on the rich. Fact check? Crises always hit the poor the hardest. Progress? Hardly.
- + Even after studying all the statistics, people might remain discontent and concerned about the future. Irrational? Such is life, and politics need to account for that. Comparisons with chimpanzees don’t help.
- + If you’re heading toward a cliff, you might be moving forward, but at the end you’ll still be fucked.

If you were wondering about Rosling’s political convictions, they are no secret. “I strongly believe that liberal democracy is the best way to run a country,” he declares in *Factfulness* – before, no surprises there, turning to some more statistics.

## ***Doing Good: Peter Singer***

The philosopher Peter Singer is the world’s most renowned living proponent of utilitarianism and a hero for those who believe in a rational approach to ethics. Singer lacks the star appeal of Dawkins and Rosling, but fares well as a public intellectual nonetheless, not least because he is in sync with social movements. His 1975 book *Animal Liberation* was highly influential for animal rights activists. In recent years, he has become an adherent of “effective altruism,” which he describes in his 2015 book *The Most Good You Can Do* as a “philosophy and social movement which applies evidence and reason to working out the most effective ways to improve the world.” Effective altruism is “an advance in ethical behavior” and “based on a very simple idea: we should do the most good we can.”

In *The Most Good You Can Do*, Singer ensures his readers that “I am not trying to paint effective altruists as coldly rational calculating machines.” It’s interesting to know that he wasn’t trying, because that’s certainly what he did. Singer cherishes the fact that effective altruists “tend to be more influenced by reasoning than by emotions.” One of the persons he portrays explains that “numbers turned me into an altruist,” while another states that “when something didn’t seem reasonable, logical, or fair, I’d fight against it.” There’s also the effective altruist who thinks that

people don't donate kidneys because "they don't understand math." Singer concludes: "Effective altruism does not require the kind of strong emotional empathy that people feel for identifiable individuals."

Singer links effective altruism to a high IQ, and a typical description of an effective altruist's activities reads thus: "writing his thesis, studying a language, practicing his guitar, and writing children's books, a novel for adults, short stories, and a translation of Plato's *Cratylus* that preserves the puns most translators consider to be untranslatable." If you feel that dinner parties with effective altruists would be an intimidating affair, I can't blame you. How do you converse with people on the road to a "fully ethical life," while you are stuck with a "minimally acceptable ethical life"?

Effective altruists are not "'warm glow' donors," who give small donations to many different charities. Tied down by emotional baggage, these "'warm glow' donors" are "not really concerned to do the most good." After all, "if they stopped to think, they would realize that the cost of processing the donation is likely to exceed any benefit it brings to the charity." Duh! Singer tells us how to improve: "Effective altruists ... are strongly influenced by analytical information" and "use it to override those elements of their emotional impulses that lead other people to act less effectively." Way to go!

The very first effective altruist we encounter in *The Most Good You Can Do* took a job at Wall Street, as this was where he could make the most money and, hence, do the most good. Singer dedicates a couple of pages to addressing questions about the personal and social implications of taking a job at Wall Street, but easily brushes off all concerns. Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, he lets us know, are "the greatest effective altruists in human history." Now, if you think that working with people in need might deserve at least similar credit, think again: "Whereas you would have been replaceable as a charity worker, you are not replaceable as a donor."

Peter Singer has no time for debates about how systematic change might be a more sustainable tool for making the world a better place than privileged individuals discovering philanthropy as a hobby. Fight capitalism? Come on! Says Singer: "Like it or not, for the foreseeable future we seem to be stuck with some variety of capitalism, and along with it come markets in stocks, bonds, and commodities. These markets serve a variety of roles, including rising investment capital, reducing risk, and smoothing out swings in commodity prices. They don't seem inherently evil."

It is somewhat mind-boggling that in a book about "the most good you can do," the closest you come to any kind of political engagement is a thumbs-up for advocacy organizations by the likes of Bono's ONE. Within Singer's logic, this makes sense of course. After all, such organizations manage to convince politicians that supporting charitable causes can be good promotion and, if "done right," economically beneficial to themselves. They "influence the giving culture of affluent nations," which makes Singer happy.

Peter Singer suggests that what motivates effective altruism is "empathy, the ability to put oneself in the position of others and identify with their feelings or emotions." Apart from this standing in curious contrast to the assertion that effective altruists are "more moved by arguments than by empathy," I believe it to be untrue. Effective altruists are moved by narcissism, the wish to be better than everyone else. Hence, the absurd, numbers-based race for moral superiority rather than any attempt to build a world where there is no possibility for such races. To suggest that someone taking a job at Wall Street in order to pimp his donations does more good than someone who is involved in building alternatives to a social, political, and economic

system that perpetuates inequality is insane, and the more you try to present it as rational the more insane it becomes.

It is not individual supermen who make the world a better place but people's collective efforts. Singer's rhetoric is deceptive to the point of being disingenuous. Donors don't save lives. Even if they donate to causes that concern life-or-death matters, they only *help* save lives. That's an important ethical difference, and one that you could expect a world-renowned moral philosopher to acknowledge. If you donate mosquito nets to protect children in African communities, they are worth nothing if community members don't see to it that the children sleep under them every night. It is the children's caretakers, their families and friends, who save their lives, not some First World donor who looks down on them because they might use their emotions as a moral compass rather than dry calculations.

## ***Complexity***

It is no coincidence that the figureheads of the science-reason-and-rationalism school are almost all white male academics. Nor is it a coincidence that they like to drop anecdotes about the famous people they know, the prestigious institutions they lecture at, and the important meetings they attend. Their love for reason, it appears, isn't strong enough to suppress an emotion whose suppression they actually might benefit from: vanity.

Selling arrogance as brilliance does, unfortunately, work in a system that manages to sell just about anything. But, underneath the hype, it's all a big swindle. Malcolm McLaren would have loved it, but there is no reason for us to do so as well. The abdication of political change, the defense of the status quo, and apologism for a system of inequality, oppression, and ecological devastation are anything but harmless.

The men portrayed above all have a dedicated supporter in Bill Gates. That is no coincidence either. Gates says about Richard Dawkins, "I consider him to be one of the great scientific writer/explainers of all time." The cover of Rosling's *Factfulness* is adorned by the Bill Gates quote, "One of the most important books I've ever read – an indispensable guide to thinking clearly about the world." And Peter Singer's *The Most Good You Can Do* includes the Bill Gates blurb, "*The Most Good You Can Do* is an optimistic and compelling look at the positive impact that giving can have on the world." Bill Gates is not the mastermind of some loony conspiracy to take over the world, but he is a representative of the ruling class, and the positions sketched above serve him well. It is about material interests and their ideological justification.

The threat of the far right is very real. It is true that calculated misinformation, fabrication, and deception belong to its tactics. But the problem is not that the commanders of the far right are overly emotional. The problem is that they are thugs. This is not about rationality vs. irrationality, and we must not be tricked into a neoliberal version of "us vs. them." What we need is compassion *and* reflection; passion *and* level-headedness; desire *and* cool. A world as complex and complicated as ours requires (real) critical thinking and open-mindedness; a response to all needs, emotional as well as intellectual. Some individuals cutting out a path to personal righteousness is irrelevant. Making the world a better place is a messy affair. It doesn't come from glamorizing one aspect of life that happens to correspond to your personal preferences and interests – especially not, if these are deeply ingrained in the systems we need to overcome.

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