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THE MONTHLY REVIEW

Coronavirus and the dilemma of the 'Drowning Strangers'

● If the pandemic has made us think of others, do we wish to help them to help ourselves, or because we are kind and decent?



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Humankind: A Hopeful History, Rutger Bregman (Bloomsbury, 2020)

Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help, Larissa MacFarquhar (Penguin, 2015)

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, Kwame Anthony Appiah (Norton, 2007)

The Plague, by Albert Camus, translated by Robin Buss (Penguin, 2001)

As with many of you reading these words, I felt compelled to act when the lockdown came. It is not as if I had been blind, previously, to our country's inequality – though I customarily blinded myself on a daily basis, looking determinedly at my steering wheel while waiting for the light to turn so as to avoid a needy eye, or away from the daily news broadcasts of political protest and violent crime seeded by poverty.

But suddenly the hunger of others seemed intolerable. Perhaps this was because we were "all in it together", all suffering and fearful in our own ways, as if in wartime, even if my loss was only that of the freedom of movement. Perhaps it was because the comfort of my own lockdown made my perception of the discomfort of others that much sharper. At first it was personal. I thought of those who work for me. I reached out to the Zimbabwean men who built my house, and whom I knew would be out of work and without access to the relief promised by our government to South Africans.

Then it was local: a Kalk Bay/St James chapter of the laudable Cape Town Community Action Network (CAN) set about identifying 70 hungry households in our neighbourhood and began fundraising to feed them. Most, but not all, were in the fishing community; people I probably know by sight, if not by name. A friend set up her own feeding scheme, mainly in nearby Masiphumelele where my builders lived, and because I trust her and her networks, I helped there, too.

Then I remembered the famous 1971 essay by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, which asks the reader to consider walking past a shallow pond in which a child is drowning. Should you save the child even if it means ruining your clothes? Of course! Larissa MacFarquhar paraphrases Singer's argument in *Strangers Drowning*: "Children are dying

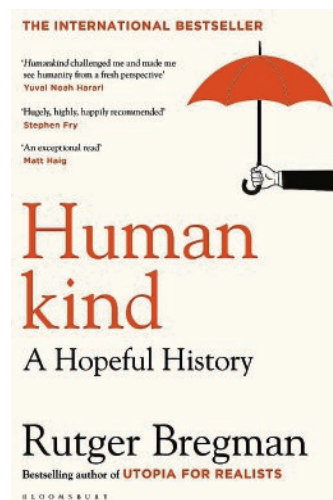


Reaching out: Asanda Kaka helps distribute food as part of a hunger relief initiative in Cape Town during the Covid-19 pandemic. /Lisa Garson

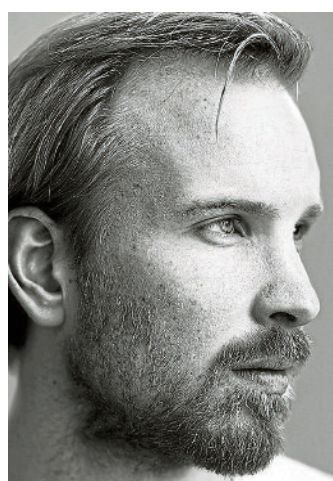
all the time, so if we can save them without sacrificing anything of equal importance, particularly something as unimportant as extra clothes, we ought to do it... How could a person who would consider it unforgivable to allow a child to drown in front of him be content to let an equally helpless child die, just because he was further away? It made no sense.

McFarquhar's purpose in *Strangers Drowning* is to examine what she calls "extreme altruism" – the "do-gooders" who follow Singer's moral imperative and give their lives to helping others – but also its impossibility, for most of us, as a way of being. I have been chewing over it, during this pandemic, alongside *Human Kind*, in which Dutch wunderkind historian Rutger Bregman argues that human beings are hardwired to be kind and decent. Bregman writes that we have prevailed as a species because of our sociability – "survival of the friendliest" – rather than our selfishness: "survival of the fittest".

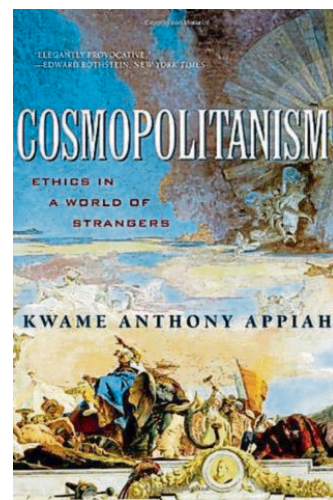
I think I know why I was helping people close-by. It was partly because kindness springs from empathy, and empathy requires proximity: it is easier to empathise with others when you look them in the eye. It was also because of what philosophers call "enlightened self-interest": it is not in my interest to have starving and desperate people in my home community.



It was Alexis de Tocqueville who identified "enlightened self-interest" in his writings about the US, and it is now at the core of so many of the arguments for economic redistribution: a buffer against the political instability and violent crime that



Rutger Bregman



threatens our middle-class peace. This was the argument, you might remember, used to persuade white South Africans to accept majority rule, and it now underpins the private sector's Solidarity Fund, set up to provide Covid-19 relief in our country.

The experience of my neighbourhood's CAN project reveals the contours (and limitations) of "enlightened self-interest" as a moral code: "While donor fatigue has set in around giving money, the soup-making project is thriving", one of the co-ordinators, Alexis Roberts, told me.

Even though making soup is less effective than donating money in fighting hunger, and arguably less empowering for the recipients, "people seem to want more to feed people by making soup, because it makes them feel good".

Soup is nourishment but it is

nurture too: you stir care into it, rather than simply pushing a button on your banking app to help make a problem go away. Our "self-interest" is emotional even before it is social or political: the need to connect, to be doing something, to feel good. But making soup is also more direct: you know that your investment – your labour – is hitting the empty spot in someone's stomach. You don't need to trust in a middleman, who might have his own appetites (horribly, as we have seen, in this country), or simply an agenda different to yours. It puts you into physical contact with people different to yourself – and, as Bregman writes, "looking back on the most hopeful shifts in recent decades we see that trust and contact were instrumental every time".

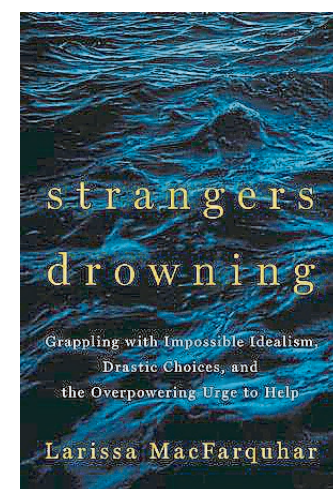
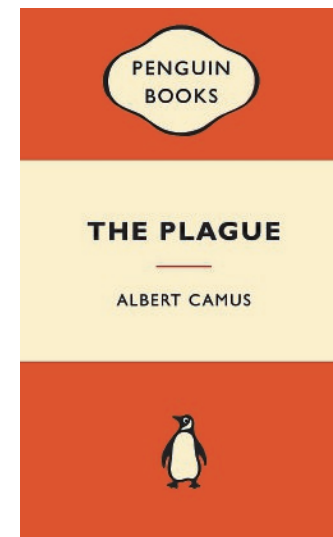
Bregman actually uses the SA transition to exemplify this, describing how former enemies engaged with each other around the negotiating table. He writes that one of the main reasons gay rights have been won since the 1960s is that "as more and more brave souls came out of the closet, friends and co-workers and mothers learned that not everybody has the same sexual preference. And that that's okay." He also notes, sharply, the converse, in Donald Trump's popularity: he cites a study showing that "the racial and ethnic isolation of whites at the zip-code level is one of the strongest predictors of Trump support".

Hannah Arendt wrote about loneliness as one of the "origins of totalitarianism" in her famous 1951 work: for people who are isolated and lack "normal social relationships... it is through surrendering their individual selves to ideology that [they] rediscover their purpose and self-respect". The economist Noreena Hertz cites these words in her new book, *The Lonely Century*, and tracks the way today's populist movements feed off peoples' sense of isolation, given online life, economic hardship – and now the pandemic.

"Even before coronavirus struck, loneliness was becoming one of the defining emotions of the 21st century," she wrote recently, warning that we ignore this at our peril.

If racism and xenophobia stem from a lack of contact with people different to you, so too does selfishness – something darker than self-interest. "If you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere," former British prime minister Theresa May said, arguing for the nativism of Brexit.

The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah disagrees, defining "cosmopolitanism", in his book of the same name, as the twinning of two moral codes: that "we have obligations to others... beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kin and kind", and that "we take seriously the value not just of human life, but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them their significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences."



At the beginning of the lockdown, I briefly volunteered delivering chronic medication to patients, in Masiphumelele, given that they could not collect it themselves. Why, I have asked myself, did I do this? Of course, it was because I wanted to put my able body and four wheels in the service of others less fortunate. But if I am to be honest it is also because I wanted to see for myself how my neighbours – down the road, but on a different planet – were coping. My supposed altruism was a cover for curiosity (it got me a permit, after all) and led to an influential article I wrote. Appiah, thank goodness, finds this acceptable: "A genuinely cosmopolitan response begins with caring to try to understand why that child is dying. Cosmopolitanism is about intelligence and curiosity as well as engagement."

Does this mean I should be

THE MECHANISM THAT MAKES US THE KINDEST SPECIES ALSO MAKES US THE CRUELLEST SPECIES ON THE PLANET

making soup and having a chat with its recipients when I deliver it, rather than practising what Singer has defined as "effective altruism", making cold and rational decisions to save as many drowning children as possible with the funds I have to dispose? But if I am to become an Effective Altruist – this is now a global movement – why am I donating to my local CAN at all, when there are more than enough other do-gooders in Kalk Bay to help those 70 families, but vast swathes of poverty just down Baden-Powell Drive in the shacklands at the edge of Khayelitsha?

And why stop there, when the primary health-care system in the Western Cape remains sound, and South Africans, at least, get social welfare grants?

Appiah tests this argument with its extreme but logical application: why save the child in the shallow pond at all, when you can sell the clothes you would have ruined and donated the funds to a charity that could save 90 lives with, say, malaria nets?

McFarquhar humanises altruism with a series of profiles of people who have gone to extremes to help others, interleaved with the powerful arguments against altruism, made by economists (Adam Smith), scientists (Charles Darwin), psychologists (Sigmund Freud) and anthropologists (Marcel Mauss) who argue, in one way or another, that humanity is self-interested. Bregman summarises the compelling evidence debunking much of this early "science" – or showing how it has been misinterpreted and manipulated, by an information industry (news is a drug that hooks us on exceptional malleability and violence), an entertainment industry (from *Planet of the Apes* to *Big Brother*) and even a literary canon (*Lord of the Flies*) invested in what one scientist calls the "vener theory" of humanity: that "civilisation is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the merest provocation".

Bregman is a millennial Jean-Jacques Rousseau: our inherent decency is curled into evil actions, he argues, by the institutions of civilisation and the people who run them, exploiting a kink in our DNA. He cites the evolutionary biologist Brian Hare: "The mechanism that makes us the kindest species also makes us the cruellest species on the planet."

Over the millennia, we have self-domesticated ourselves into sociability, pumping up our levels of the "love hormone", oxytocin. But oxytocin has a dark side, according to a 2010 study: while it "enhances affection for friends", it intensifies our "aversion to strangers", writes Bregman.

Empathy and xenophobia are "flip sides of a coin", and "the more we identify with victims, the more we generalise about our enemies".

Bregman's source here is the US psychologist Paul Bloom, author of the 2016 book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. I prefer Appiah's formulation, which places empathy at the very core of humanity, in the way it helps us understand others, but I was compelled – particularly in my thinking about the pandemic – by Bregman's account of collaboration between a Buddhist monk and a neurologist. The neurologist, Tania Singer, gave the monk, Matthieu Ricard, a documentary about Romanian orphans to watch, and scanned his brain while instructing him to imagine how they felt; after an hour, "he was a wreck".

Then she tried something different: "He wasn't to imagine

himself in their shoes. Rather, she wanted him to apply the skill he'd spent years perfecting, feeling not with them, but for them." Ricard "concentrated on calling up feelings of warmth, concern and care. Instead of personally experiencing their suffering, he kept himself removed from it." Singer watched as "wholly different parts of Ricard's brain lit up", activating "compassion", a "more controlled, remote and constructive" mentality than energy-sapping empathy.

In my own work as a journalist, I am required to activate a professional empathy, and I know how it exhausts me. I am often struck by my own caprice: how I can shine the light of my concern on some people, particularly if on the job, while entirely shutting out others if, in some way or another, they are in the way of my day.

It is, of course, a survival instinct, and though I am not a Buddhist, I see a helpful lesson in Ricard's practice.

No fiction I know dramatises these dilemmas better than Albert Camus's 1947 masterpiece, *The Plague*, required reading for these times. A Parisian journalist named Rambert finds himself locked down in the plague-infested Algerian city Oran; all he wants is to get out of there, back to Paris and the woman he loves. Earlier in his life, he had fought on the losing side of the republicans in the Spanish Civil War and is now a passionate cynic: "I've had enough of people who die for ideas," he announces to the doctor Rieux, explaining why he has not joined the doctor's health team, tending to the sick and the dying. "I don't believe in heroism... What interests me is living or dying for what one loves."

Rieux challenges him, gently: "Man is not an idea, Rambert." "He is an idea, and a very brief one," Rambert shoots back, "just as soon as he turns away from love."

"This whole thing is not about heroism," Rieux reasons. "It's about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency." For the doctor, decency "consists in doing my job".

Towards the end of the novel, Rieux has an intense conversation with another visitor trapped in the city, a young man named Tarrou, who has thrown himself into the work of the team – and will die as a result. Tarrou is interested in the sanctity that comes from giving one's life for the good of humanity, but Rieux says he feels "more solidarity with the defeated than with saints. I don't think I have any taste for heroism and sainthood. What interests me is to be a man."

The two men decide to cement their new friendship with a midnight swim, illicitly using their essential-service passes to access the shore. "It's silly to live only in the plague," Rieux argues – not just with his friend, but with the notion of selflessness: "Of course a man should fight for the victims. But if he ceases to love anything else, then what is the point in fighting?"