



## Why the Best Philanthropists are Optimistically Realistic

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As everyone knows, we live in the most terrifying times in history. North Korea. Trump. Global warming. Job-stealing robots. Trump. Oxycontin. Trump. Need I continue?

What if what we read about every time we turn on the news just isn't true? That the world is richer than ever before, with more people living longer lives and living in better health than at any time in the past? That the daily diet of apocalypse in the media is, well, fake news?

That's the premise of a [provocative article](#) by Oliver Burkeman at The Guardian.

Burkeman is talking about a group of thinkers I've written about in the past, including British science journalist Matt Ridley (whose book *The Evolution of Everything* I reviewed [here](#)) and the late Swedish public health expert Dr. Hans Rosling, who I wrote about [here](#). I would also include Nobel Laureate Sir Angus Deaton, whose book *The Great Escape* I reviewed [here](#) as well. A final member of this group is Cato Institute fellow Johan Norberg, whose new book *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* was published last year.

According to Burkeman, the current group of optimists perform variations on this theme by Julian Simon, which Simon [wrote](#) on the 25th anniversary of Earth Day in 1995:

“Here are the facts. On average, people throughout the world have been living longer and eating better than ever before. Fewer people die of famine now than in earlier centuries... every single measure of material and environmental welfare in the United States has improved rather than deteriorated. This is also true of the world taken as a whole. All the long-run trends point in exactly the opposite direction from the projections of the doomsayers.”

But another intellectual parent of today's optimists is Tom Wolfe (one year older than Simon). In “The Intelligent Co-Ed's Guide to America,” published in 1976, Wolfe described a college seminar he attended where experts were describing the forthcoming inevitable apocalypse.

The ecologist contended the earth would be destroyed in a plague of smog and overpopulation. The political scientist warned that the forthcoming fascist dystopia was as certain as the sunset.

But then a college student raised his hand and said that the biggest problem he had after four years on campus was finding a parking space. The political scientist responded that life on campus was not life in the grim real world.

“I understand all that,” said the boy. “What I want to know is –how old are you, usually, when it all hits you?”

“And suddenly the situation became clear. This kid was no wiseacre! He was genuinely perplexed!... For four years he had been squinting at the horizon...looking for the grim horrors he knew—on faith—to be all around him... War! Fascism! Repression! Corruption!” And all the college student worried about was finding a place to park his car.

I am grateful to Kevin D. Williamson of National Review for excerpting this passage from Wolfe. Williamson frequently writes about poverty, most famously for suggesting that people in Appalachia who only saw a future of Mountain Dew, Oxycontin, and joblessness ought to move to cities where there is plenty of work.

Williamson notes that despite all the bad news there are plenty of amazing and hopeful signs in our country, from staggeringly efficient farms to more excellent books, films, and TV shows being produced than even the most efficient viewer or reader could see and read.

Dr. Hans Rosling made much the same point in a TED talk from 2006 called “The Best Stats You’ve Never Seen.” Dr. Rosling says that he gave a quiz to his students at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden on global health. Here is his question. Which of these pairs of countries has the highest rates of child mortality? Dr. Rosling said he deliberately picked two pairs where one country had twice as many child deaths as the other. I’ve put the correct answer in capital letters.

- Sri Lanka or TURKEY
- POLAND or South Korea
- Malaysia or RUSSIA
- PAKISTAN or Vietnam
- Thailand or SOUTH AFRICA.

On average, Dr. Rosling’s students only got 1.8 answers right. Professors at the Karolinska Institute—which awards the Nobel Prize in Medicine—got an average of 2.4 right. The chimpanzees at the zoo—who, remember, pick randomly—got 2.5 right.

In other words, a professor at an eminent Swedish university knew less about the world than someone who picked answers at random.

Dr. Rosling’s point—which he made superbly—was that if you’re going to work in development, you need to have accurate information, including understanding that in many ways the world is getting better in the ways Julian Simon described over 25 years ago.

So why don’t we know this?

Part of the answer is that we live in an attention economy where the scariest scenarios and the loudest screamers get the most airtime.

This means the likelihood of a sensible middle ground on the environment—one that admits that the planet is getting warmer slowly, giving us enough time to deal with the consequences—is

vanishingly small, because of radical environmentalists who believe both in an impending apocalypse and an equally fervent belief that anyone who disagrees with them is a thoughtless lackey of Big Oil and the Koch brothers.

But part of the problem is calling people who support factual analysis of existing economic and population trends “optimists.”

Calling them realists would be more accurate. Matt Ridley wrote *The Rational Optimist* because his trend analysis showed the world was getting better. His opinions were derived from facts about how the world worked.

Philanthropists make mistakes when they act on views of what they think the world is like, from eugenicists who thought poor people were stupid and needed to be killed or sterilized to generations of program officers who saw the poor as hopeless failures and then weren't surprised when their policies ended in disaster.

By contrast, donors who see the world as it really is—one with problems, but where the successes are far more frequent than disasters—will be able to be better grantmakers in the future.