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This is a book about a radical idea.

An idea that's long been known to make rulers nervous. An idea denied by religions and ideologies, ignored by the news media and erased from the annals of world history.

At the same time, it's an idea that's legitimised by virtually every branch of science. One that's corroborated by evolution and confirmed by everyday life. An idea so intrinsic to human nature that it goes unnoticed and gets overlooked.

If only we had the courage to take it more seriously, it's an idea that might just start a revolution. Turn society on its head. Because once you grasp what it really means, it's nothing less than a mind-bending drug that ensures you'll never look at the world the same again

So what is this radical idea?

That most people, deep down, are pretty decent.

I don't know anyone who explains this idea better than Tom Postmes, professor of social psychology at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. For years, he's been asking students the same question.

Imagine an airplane makes an emergency landing and breaks into three parts. As the cabin fills with smoke,

everybody inside realises: We've got to get out of here. What happens?

On Planet A, the passengers turn to their neighbours to ask if they're okay. Those needing assistance are helped out of the plane first. People are willing to give their lives, even for perfect strangers.

On Planet B, everyone's left to fend for themselves. Panic breaks out. There's lots of pushing and shoving. Children, the elderly, and people with disabilities get trampled underfoot.

Now the question: Which planet do we live on?

'I would estimate about 97 per cent of people think we live on Planet B,' says Professor Postmes. 'The truth is, in almost every case, we live on Planet A.'¹

Doesn't matter who you ask. Left wing or right, rich or poor, uneducated or well read – all make the same error of judgement. 'They don't know. Not freshman or juniors or grad students, not professionals in most cases, not even emergency responders,' Postmes laments. 'And it's not for a lack of research. We've had this information available to us since World War II.'

Even history's most momentous disasters have played out on Planet A. Take the sinking of the *Titanic*. If you saw the movie, you probably think everybody was blinded by panic (except the string quartet). In fact, the evacuation was quite orderly. One eyewitness recalled that 'there was no indication of panic or hysteria, no cries of fear, and no running to and fro'.²

Or take the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks. As the Twin Towers burned, thousands of people descended the stairs calmly, even though they knew their lives were in danger. They stepped

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aside for firefighters and the injured. ‘And people would actually say: “No, no, you first,”’ one survivor later reported. ‘I couldn’t believe it, that at this point people would actually say “No, no, please take my place.” It was uncanny.’³

There is a persistent myth that by their very nature humans are selfish, aggressive and quick to panic. It’s what Dutch biologist Frans de Waal likes to call *veneer theory*: the notion that civilisation is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the merest provocation.⁴ In actuality, the opposite is true. It’s when crisis hits – when the bombs fall or the floodwaters rise – that we humans become our best selves.