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On Being Human

CHRISTOPHER BOYLE, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER & KELLY-ANN ALLEN, MONASH UNIVERSITY

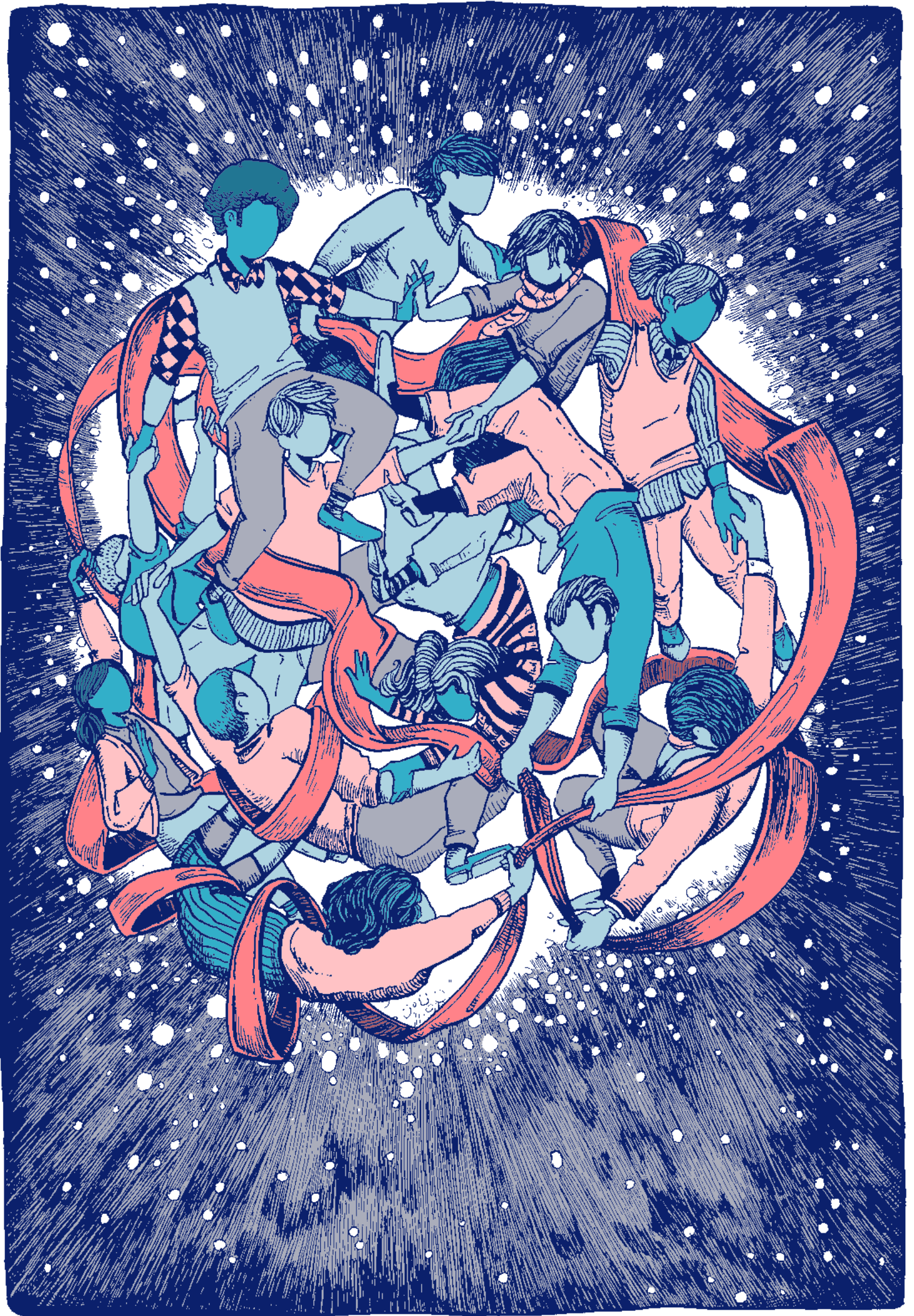


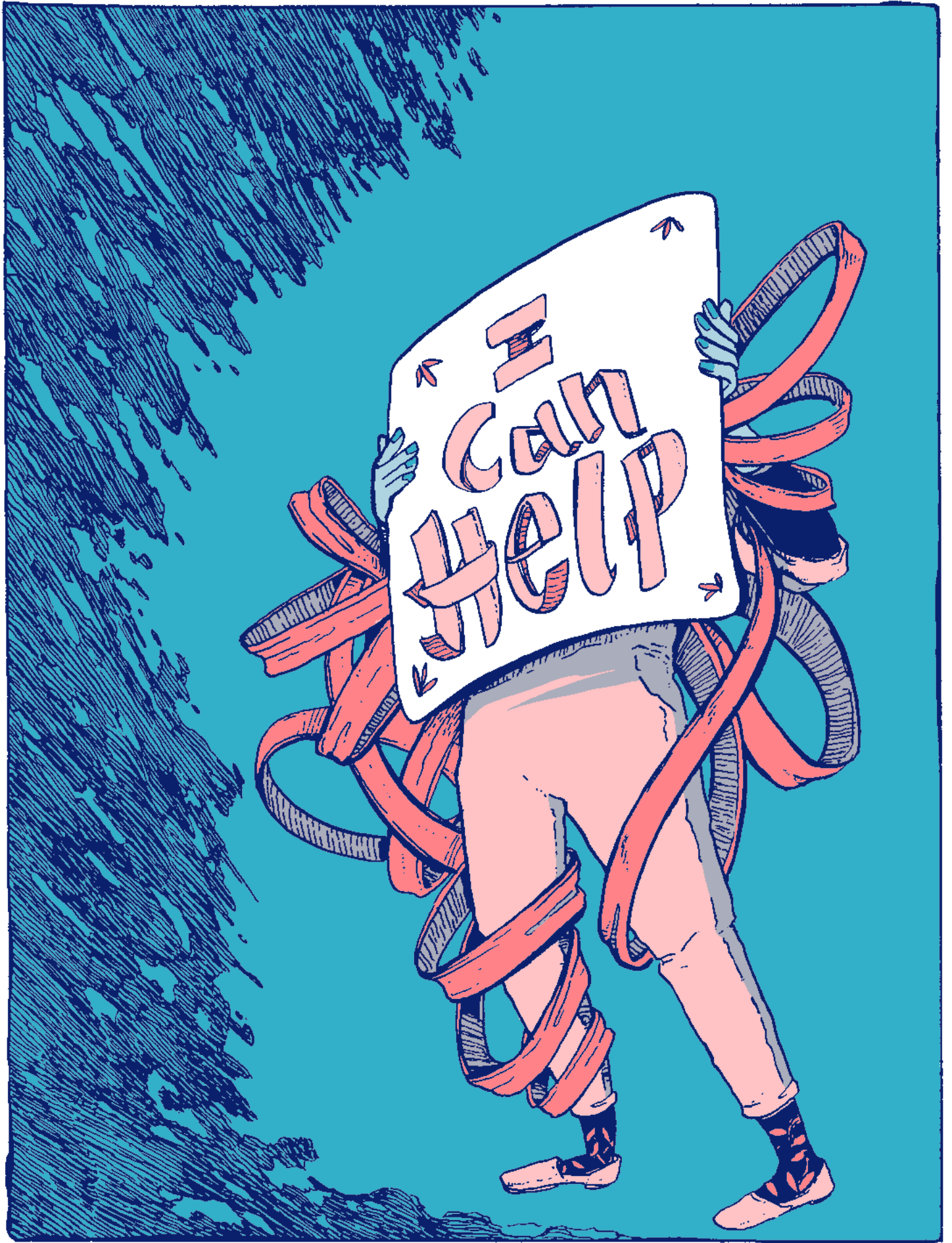
BRILL

As the Editors-in-Chief of the Journal of Belonging and Human Connection (JBHC), one of the newest journals in Brill's extensive suite of titles, we are honoured to accept the invitation to write an essay for Brill's Annual Report. JBHC is a new peer-reviewed journal which focuses on the theoretical, methodological, and empirical advances of the study of belonging and human connection. Our journal provides an interdisciplinary, internationally relevant platform for scholarly work investigating the human desire to belong and be connected with others.

Christopher Boyle, University of Exeter &
Kelly-Ann Allen, Monash University

In the present moment, as we live through a global pandemic that is unprecedented in living memory, the topic of human connection and belonging could not be more apposite. Our current situation brings home the reality that we are all embedded in social systems that are much larger than ourselves. To sustain these systems, society dictates that we follow moral and legal codes that regulate how we behave as individuals within a wider collective world. We cannot all behave as if others do not exist, so it follows that there must be some form of understanding and cooperation that enables society to function without falling into irreparable chaos and conflict. In Western philosophy, these cooperative endeavours are frequently analysed in terms of the two ethical theories that Kant called *ethical formalism* and *utilitarianism*. The former relates having knowledge of what the good *actually* is to an appreciation of universal necessity. To put it briefly, one must understand that doing good is not a solitary individualistic pursuit but rather an activity that strives towards ends that are in the best of interests of humanity. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, is a form of consequentialism which holds that the end goal, the happiness of the greatest number of people, is more important than the process by which it is achieved. If the outcome can be regarded as being good, then, no matter the journey taken to get there, achieving it should be regarded as an encouraging and positive ethical outcome. The end, ultimately, justifies the means.





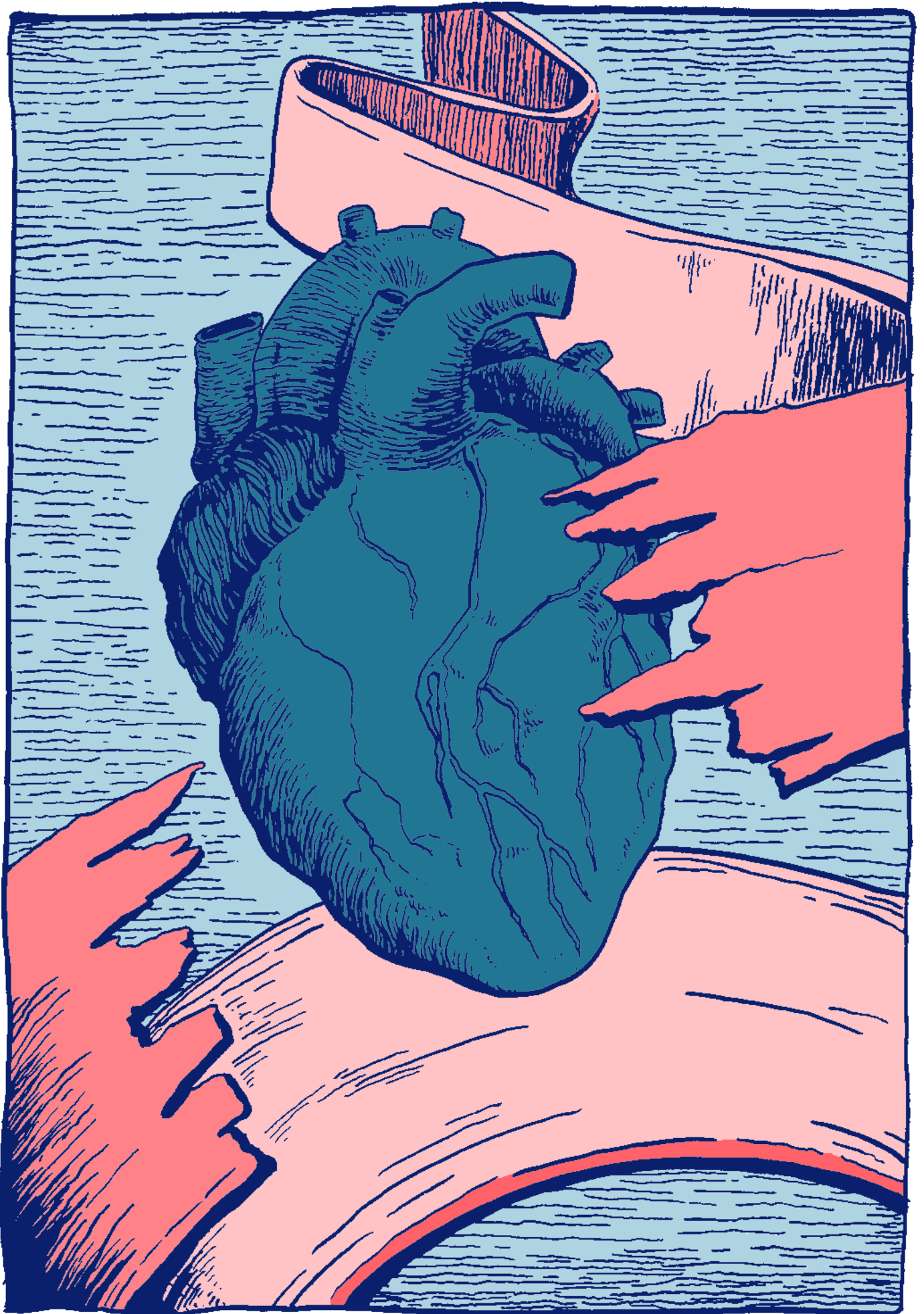
“Stories of kindness and support for others have also come to light”

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, the enforcing of lockdowns by national governments is premised on the ethical assumption that the good that will be achieved by taking such drastic governmental action outweighs the costs involved in achieving that end. While governments around the world have provided support for individuals suffering from the economic effects of these lockdowns, the prevailing consequentialist view is that this suffering is a price that must be paid to ensure that as few people as possible will die from the virus. The pandemic has often created new difficulties for individuals and has intensified pre-existing suffering for many. Restrictions imposed by physical distancing, self-isolation, and quarantining obstructed opportunities for many people to feel a sense of belonging and connect with others as they had done formerly. Shortages in supermarkets prompted individualistic behaviours that responded to fear and anxiety. Yet many stories of kindness and support for others have also come to light – an altruistic surprise for those whose world views led them to expect only selfishness and greed from their fellow humans. This positive humanity has repeatedly emphasised the links that hold individuals together as a collective, showing that support for one another offers greater gains than does looking out purely for oneself.



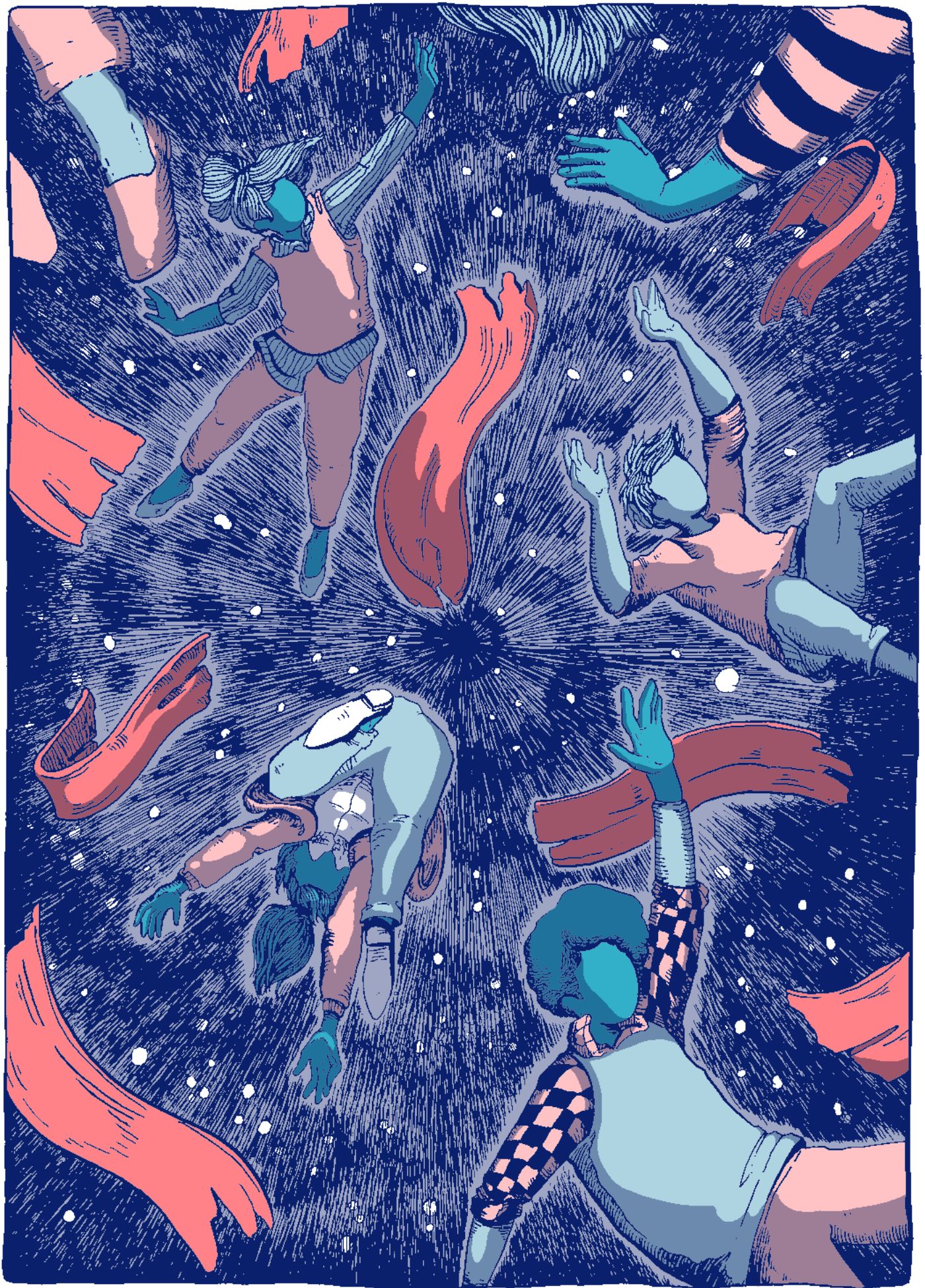
“The links that hold individuals together as a collective”

The debate about whether “*humans are inherently immoral and will take advantage*” wherever they can, has deep roots and was an important topic for thinkers in classical Greece. In his *Republic*, Plato reflects on the idea that “humans could not be trusted to act ethically if they thought they would get away with it”. Plato has one of his characters advance the view that, while laws may maintain social behaviour if people think there is a risk of being caught, if someone was able to act with impunity there would be nothing to constrain them. He illustrates this viewpoint with the story of Gyges and his ring. According to the tale, the shepherd Gyges acts unethically because *he can get away with doing so*, and this, the speaker claims, demonstrates that nobody does good willingly, but only because they are compelled to do so. Plato’s Socrates devotes himself to arguing against this view in the remainder of the work, but it is far from clear whether he succeeds, or indeed whether Plato intends for him to succeed. If he did not, he would be far from the only thinker to hold that humans are fundamentally flawed, that their behaviour is coloured by what Nobel Laureate William Golding described as “the darkness of man’s heart.” This assumed *darkness* is supposedly inherent in being human.



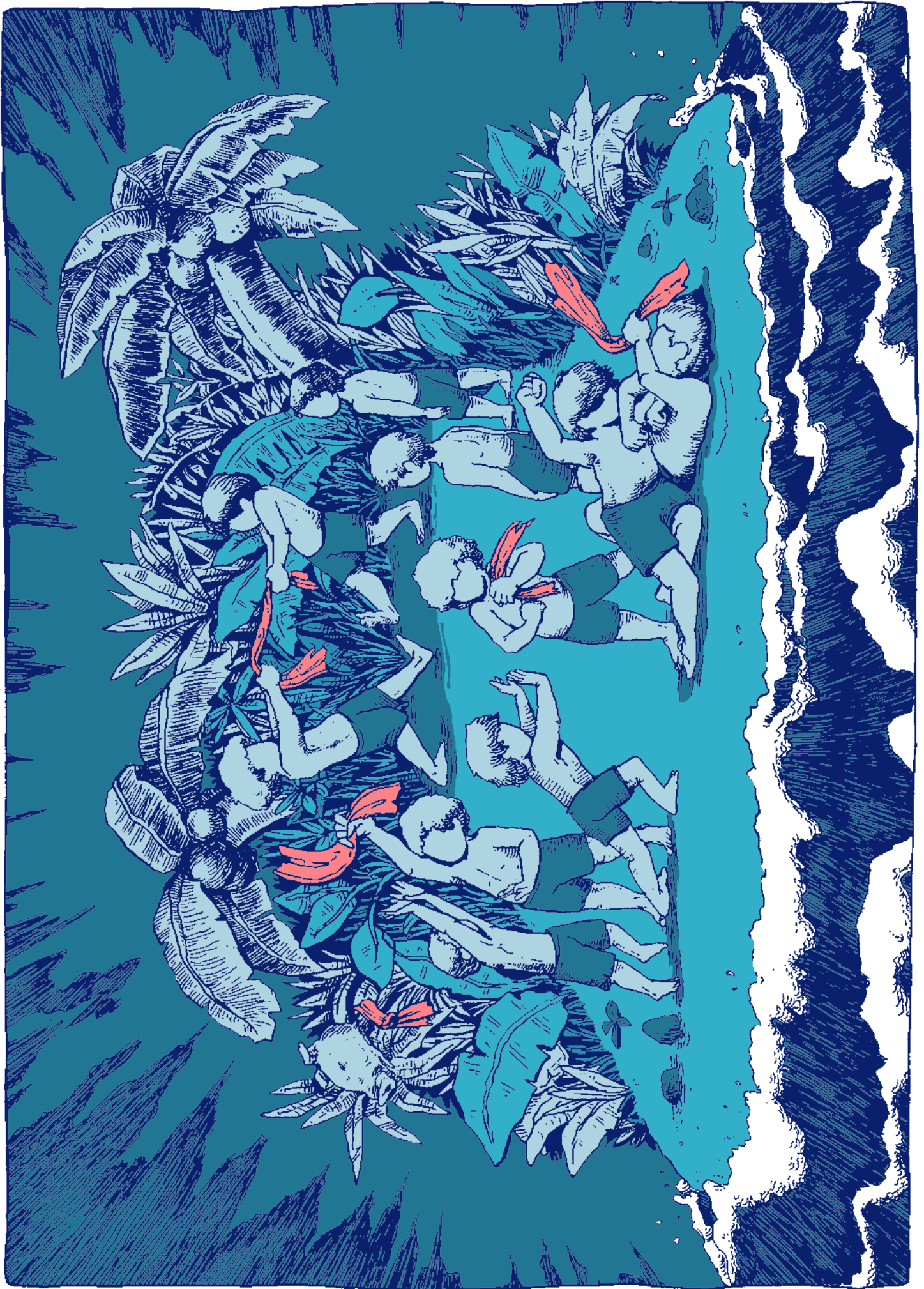
“The darkness of man’s heart”

Golding based his first and most famous novel, *Lord of the Flies*, on the premise that people require externally imposed order and that without it chaos will ensue. The views communicated in this book – that the lack of a moral code will inevitably lead to the breakdown of society – has been extraordinarily influential, particularly in Western countries where the book has been taught in high schools for decades. In Golding’s story, a group of teenage boys are marooned on a desert island, where, without adult supervision, they descend into selfishness and immorality. Golding’s own background takes the backdrop of two world wars and it may be easy to understand why the idea of being humane when being human is fragile. What is more difficult to understand, however, is why the notion that the human being is essentially selfish could take root as a constant in the public narrative for more than half a century after the book’s publication in 1954. Because, there are very good empirical reasons to think that the grim picture Golding paints and Plato considers does not truly reflect how humans behave in adversity or without formal structures to govern them.



“Lord of the Flies”

Golding's bleak vision begins to recede further when one discovers that a very real incident took place in 1965, 11 years after the publication of *Lord of the Flies*, in which a group of Tongan school boys were stranded on a desert island in the Pacific. As Dutch historian and author Rutger Bregman recounts, the six boys lived in harmony with one another on the uninhabited and forgotten island of Ata for some 15 months, working together and looking out for the collective. These events suggest less the idea that a darkness resides in the heart of all humans than Lewis Carroll's comment that “*one of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth the doing is what we do for others*”. The presumption, then, that humans can be expected to act selfishly when they can, does not seem to hold, or at least not in the universal manner reflected on by Plato and Golding. We may not be as selfish as presumed. Important evidence emerges from the empirical psychological literature which demonstrates that *most* people feel pleasure, happiness and satisfaction from acts of altruism. Many evolutionary scientists, the most famous being Charles Darwin, consider such behaviours to have a biological cause important for our survival as a species.





In the age of COVID – an age that we can hope is moving towards its end with the promise of mass vaccination – stories of kindness that demonstrate the importance of positive human connection and belonging have been prevailing. Reflecting on his time incarcerated at Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl wrote that *“when we are no longer able to change a situation - we are challenged to change ourselves.”* The COVID-19 pandemic has offered us all a valuable opportunity to reflect on how we treat others. Do we support the less vulnerable? Do we think selflessly about other people and strive towards equitable outcomes? As humans, it seems that many of us look out for each other. We do not, overall, fall into selfishness or display antisocial behaviours whenever we think we can get away with it. The idea that we might makes for a compelling and dramatic story, but it does not align with the reality of the human condition, which values connection and belonging as much, if not more, than it does getting ahead as an individual. We belong to communities and these very communities need individuals who care for and think of others. COVID-19, for all the pain and suffering it has brought with it, may, in the end, help us to discover that there is goodness out there, even if it is sometimes hidden from us. And above all truly understand the fundamental importance of our need and purpose toward belonging and human connection.

Colophon

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"Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality." — Lewis Carroll

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/may/09/the-real-lord-of-the-flies-what-happened-when-six-boys-were-shipwrecked-for-15-months>

Illustrations

Illustrations by Gwen Stok, alumna of the Willem de Kooning Academie. Gwen Stok works as independent illustrator and artist. She creates illustrations, comics and autonomous work that provide insight into human nature with a philosophical playfulness. In 2020-2021 she was appointed Special City Artist of Rotterdam. www.gwenst.com

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The article "On Human Nature" by Christopher Boyle, University of Exeter, and Kelly-Ann Allen, Monash University, will also be published in the *Journal of Belonging and Human Connection* (JBHC), Brill, 2021.



