

Homo Deus: The End of Humanism

Primary Source Material by Yuval N Harari

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow (2015 Hebrew, 2017 English), Harper

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (2011 Hebrew, 2014 English), Harper

Background talks on Homo sapiens: <https://youtu.be/nzj7Wg4DAbs>;

Homo deus: <https://youtu.be/JJ1yS9JIJKs> (a great conversation; 52 minutes + Q&A)

Summary

In these 2 volumes, historian Yuval Harari, reviews the successive transformations of humanity and human civilizations from small bands of hunter-gatherers, through the agrarian and industrial revolutions to today's scientific revolution while reflecting on what it means to be human. Our collective belief in abstract stories like money, corporations, nations and religions enables human cooperation on a large scale and differentiates us from all other animals. Today's discussion will focus on a possible transition from the humanist values of individual freedoms and "free will" to a disturbing dystopian future where individualism is devalued and people are managed by artificially intelligent systems. This transition is enabled by reductions in *Famine, plague and war* that have historically motivated human behavior. Further advances in biotechnology, psychology and computer science could produce a superhuman elite having the resources and opportunity to benefit directly from technological enhancements while leaving the majority of humankind behind.

Background

1. **The Cognitive Revolution*** (c. 70,000 BCE, emergence of collective imagination). Hunter-gatherers invent common stories to explain the world enabling social cohesion at a local tribal level. Animism, a belief in the intrinsic spirituality of all things, is prevalent.
(*Not to be confused with the birth of cognitive science in the 1950's.)
2. **The Agricultural Revolution** (c. 12,000 BCE, the development of farming). Farming supports human specialization and development of large co-located communities but may have reduced the average quality of life. Collective beliefs enable large-scale, flexible cooperation among human beings. Religion and absolutism provide meaning, value and control.
3. **The Scientific / Industrial Revolution and the rise of Humanism** (c. 1500 CE, the emergence of objective science). *An end of famine, war and plague?* People accept scientific uncertainty as a driver for progress. Ethics and values are derived internally within each individual and individuals have intrinsic value. Humanism supplants religion for meaning and wisdom.
4. **The Information Revolution and "Dataism"** Human behavior is understood as biological algorithms. Intelligent machines know humans better than humans can know themselves. The automation of work means individuals are less necessary. A biologically enhanced elite will have the resources and opportunity to separate themselves from the rest of humanity.

What's next? Immortality, happiness and genetic control: **Homo Deus !!!**

(for some but not for all ?)

Some Discussion Questions

1. Does technology, social stratification and empire enhance the human experience?
Are we happier than hunter-gatherers?
2. What is humanism?
3. Are people really just the sum of their biological algorithms?
4. When will we trust artificial intelligence? Is AI the inevitable next evolutionary step?
5. What do we (humans) really want the future to be? What are our transcendent values?

Harari quotes from an interview in The Guardian (19March2017):

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/mar/19/yuval-harari-sapiens-readers-questions-lucy-prebble-arianna-huffington-future-of-humanity>

Humanity's biggest myth? "gaining more power over the world, over the environment, we will be able to make ourselves happier and more satisfied with life. Looking again from a perspective of thousands of years, we have gained enormous power over the world and it doesn't seem to make people significantly more satisfied than in the stone age."

On Morality: "we are very close to really having divine powers of creation and destruction. The future of the entire ecological system and the future of the whole of life is really now in our hands. And what to do with it is an ethical question and also a scientific question."

On Inequality: "With the new revolution in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, there is a danger that again all the power and benefits will be monopolised by a very small elite, and most people will end up worse off than before."

On timing: "I think that *Homo sapiens* as we know them will probably disappear within a century or so, not destroyed by killer robots or things like that, but changed and upgraded with biotechnology and artificial intelligence into something else, into something different."