
Harari, Yuval Noah – Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow

Harper, 2017, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★★★

Liberal humanism has overtaken traditional religion as the dominating narrative to drive the world forward. Still, the dominance is only temporary and in time dataism will take over. *Homo Deus* is the story of how this will happen and how the human race potentially will succumb in the process. Yuval Noah Harari who is a professor of history and teaches at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is the author of *Sapiens* that looked to the history of mankind. *Homo Deus* is the sequel where the historian instead looks to the future.

In a very condensed form the story Harari presents is the following one. Humans are only different in grade from animals. We are just slightly more advanced with regards to certain abilities but not others. The reason why the unexceptional humans have come to rule the world is our ability to rally behind shared narratives in large groups and the collective power that comes from this. Historically the dominating stories were various religions as they both provided a purpose to life and processes that helped mankind's progress. Still, there was no free will as god ruled supreme. With the breakthrough of science traditional religions were proven false. By killing god humans seized power over their own destiny but by doing this they risked losing life's purpose.

The savior turned out to be humanism that Harari defines as ideologies that worship humanity or the human – communism and Nazism are included but the chief humanist religion is democratic liberalism. Our belief in our own exceptionalism has managed to both free us from the deterministic reign of religious thought and still keep a purpose. Humanism has created a golden age – at least in relative historical terms - where starvation, war and plagues are manageable issues and where those in the elite now are looking to more ambitious goals such as eliminating death, creating artificial life and by this reaching a semi-divine status as a species.

Unfortunately science and artificial intelligence instead conspire against our ability to eat the cake

and still keep it. Neuroscience threatens to degrade us to biological automata without free will that just react to external stimuli and all that we can do robots will soon do much better. Intelligence is decoupling from consciousness. Humanism's revering of the human will falter and with it the meaning of human life will do the same. Still, people need an algorithm to live by. Just as humanism during its era was more useful than the defeated traditional religious faith, the next phase will require a new belief. The ideology that the author sees winning is called dataism where the purpose basically is data processing. "*Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing*". People will degrade to units in a universal data processing system.

I've given *Homo Deus* an average rating. Still, there is nothing average about this book. The author is encyclopedic in his knowledge-scope and the topic is the survival of the human race. The grade instead reflects the intellectual dishonesty of almost force-feeding a narrative down the reader's throat without openly discussing any uncertainties or qualifying the assumptions made along the way. What if we are exceptional - also in isolation and not only as a collective? What if we do have free will? What if Harari's rather pointless dataism attracts no-one and something else emerges? Annoyingly, three pages from the end and after spending the book bulldozing any attempt to argue against his narrative, the author hints that he himself might not believe in his own Silicon Valley dystopia. Further, the sunny description on the book sleeve describes the many wonders of human achievement, while the book in itself portrays how we are relentlessly marching towards Ragnarök. It's almost false advertising.

If you know what you are getting into and have the time to dwell on paths alternative from the author's this is a very worthwhile book to read – but don't judge it by its cover.

Mats Larsson, August 5, 2018