Review

Reviewed Work(s): Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow by Harari, Yuval Noah

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Yuval Noah Harari, professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, achieved worldwide fame with *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (reviewed in this journal, Palmer 2017). In *Sapiens*, Harari attempted a grand sweep of history, from the emergence of *Homo sapiens* in Africa a few hundred thousand years ago to life in present-day global civilization. In the last chapters of *Sapiens*, Harari suggested that the course of history might change drastically soon, due to the accelerating pace of technological development. His new book, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, picks up where *Sapiens* left off. Harari attempts to identify the most important trends in today's world and extrapolate them into the future.

The term *Homo deus* is Harari's attempt to summarize these trends (in the text, as opposed to in the title, Harari follows the Linnaean nomenclature and uses lower-case *d*). His main argument is that up until the present, humankind was haunted by three main problems: famine, infectious disease, and war. The business of the day was to deal with these problems. But now, in the third millennium, these problems are largely under control. As a consequence, humankind is now looking for new challenges. These challenges are summarized in three main aspirations: immortality, happiness, and divinity. If humankind's preoccupation used to be damage control, it is now upgrading themselves to gods. By "gods," Harari does not mean an omnipotent god of the Judeo-Christian flavor, but rather something closer to Olympian gods: incredibly powerful, but imperfect, beings. The means by which humankind will attempt this feat is technology, more specifically biological engineering, cyborg engineering, and the engineering of nonorganic beings (43).

Despite its catchy and oxymoronic subheading, about half of *Homo Deus* is dedicated to the past and the present. After a lengthy introductory chapter—68 pages—Harari spends six chapters discussing human evolution, the agricultural revolution, religion, science, and modernity. Rather than going into historical detail, however, he focuses on circumstances, ideas, and traditions that led to the present. Of particular importance for Harari's understanding of the present and predictions for the future is his view of humanism as yet another religion, but one that worships humanity and whose "primary commandment" is: "create meaning for a meaningless world" (223). The humanist religion centers its worldview on the human individual and her experiences rather than on a god or gods.

The discussions of historical trends and philosophical ideas set the stage for the last four chapters of the book, where Harari discusses what the future might look like. He argues that humanism is on its way out due to developments in science and technology. Upgrading

humans—or rather, a subset of humans, namely those with access to resources—will mean that the central category of humanism will become unstable. The explosions in information technology and bio-engineering, in combination with the idea that all living organisms can be construed as collections of algorithms, undermine the notion that human beings are individuals. Instead, a new worldview is emerging in which everything is understood as nodes in flows of information. Accordingly, says Harari, a new religion is forming, one that may replace humanism: dataism. As Harari puts it, "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" (372). Harari does not claim that dataism will overthrow humanism overnight, just as humanism did not overthrow monotheism overnight. Rather, he claims that dataism is the direction in which we are heading.

Like its predecessor, *Homo Deus* is written in an engaging and accessible style. Harari has a gift for suspenseful storytelling with a forward thrust. Part of this is due to his ability to simplify and summarize trends and intellectual traditions, often in clever and witty ways. For example: "We are suddenly showing unprecedented interest in the fate of so-called lower life forms, perhaps because we are about to become one" (99); "In ethics, the humanist motto is 'if it feels good—do it.' In politics, humanism instructs us that 'the voter knows best.' In aesthetics, humanism says that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'" (231). Quotations of this kind show both the strengths and weaknesses of Harari's writing method. Simplifications and summaries enable the identification of patterns in vast amounts of data, and as such they can serve as tools for thought and discussion. Harari raises several important and intriguing questions, such as the implications of new technology and large-scale long-term changes in worldviews, and his witty simplifications may well serve to initiate or contribute to discussions worth having. However, as tools for thought and discussion, it is important that simplifications not be simplistic.

Simplistic formulations, with off-putting effects on readers looking for nuanced discussions of complex issues, recur throughout *Homo Deus*. The first paragraph sets the tone:

> At the dawn of the third millennium, humanity wakes up, stretching its limbs and rubbing its eyes. Remnants of some awful nightmare are still drifting across its mind. 'There was something with barbed wire, and huge mushroom clouds. Oh well, it was just a bad dream.' Going to the bathroom, humanity washes its face, examines its wrinkles in the mirror, makes a cup of coffee and opens the diary. 'Let's see what's on the agenda today.' (1)

As one would expect from an opening like this, Harari's generalizations and use of "we/humanity/humankind" are often problematic. His generalizations often obscure complex historical developments and cultural differences in favor of a simple narrative. A sentence from the succeeding page provides a glaring example: "Like firefighters in a world without fire, so humankind in the twenty-first century needs to ask itself an unprecedented question: what are we going to do with ourselves?" (2). Harari does discuss how the "we" is differentiated—only privileged people will be able to participate in the attempt to become gods. This differentiation will furthermore increase the gap between the haves and the have-nots immensely. However, such discussions and qualifications sometimes come much later than audacious statements like the ones just quoted. Furthermore, the frequency with which he uses "we/humankind/humanity" counteracts the qualifications, imprinting humankind as an agent or unitary actor in the mind of the reader.

The stylistic simplicity extends to some of the arguments and ideas. As in *Sapiens*, Harari stresses the importance of stories for humans—in everything, from making sense of themselves and the world, to cooperating on large-scale projects and living in mass societies. He is undoubtedly right about the importance

of stories, but he treats the issue in somewhat misleading ways. For example, he claims that what sets humans apart from other mammals is our extraordinary capacity for imagination and cooperation. Imagination and cooperation are, furthermore, linked: "All large-scale human cooperation is ultimately based on our belief in imagined orders" (143). And for Harari, stories are the vehicles of imagined orders. Thus, stories enable large-scale cooperation. However, the origin and nature of human cooperation is a complex and contested issue. And however important stories are for humans, reducing the issue of cooperation to stories is simplistic. Harari does not discuss where stories come from or what adaptive functions storytelling might have (e.g., Boyd 2009; Gottschall 2012; Carroll et al. 2017), nor does he discuss unsettled issues surrounding human cooperation, such as group selection and the reach of altruism (e.g. Haidt 2012; Krasnow, Delton, Cosmides, and Tooby 2015; Pinker 2016; Tomasello 2016). It also leads Harari astray in some interpretations of historical events. For example: "Pharaoh and Sobek were imaginary entities who did nothing to raise or lower the Nile water level, but when millions of people believed in pharaoh and Sobek *and therefore* cooperated in building dams and digging canals, floods and droughts became rare" (162–63; my emphasis). Harari seems to suggest that this kind of large-scale cooperation is rooted in the belief in imaginary entities and stories. In reality, much labor in the ancient world (and later), including canal digging, was forced, in the form of slave and corvée labor (Scott 2017). Thus, in many cases, violence, or the threat thereof, is a more probable cause of large-scale cooperative success than a belief in imaginary entities.

The other aspect of storytelling mentioned above—its importance for humans in making sense of themselves and the world—is relevant not only to Harari's explication of human nature, but also to the narrative of *Homo Deus* itself. In Harari's narrative, outside forces play no substantive role. As we saw, he argues that humankind now largely has its main tormenters—famine, plague, and war—under control. His argument is not that they no longer exist, but that we have them more or less under control—and that when they do occur, they are not viewed as inevitable conditions of human life, but as managerial failures. The threat to humankind comes from within, from the internal logic of technological development. In line with this logic, Harari uses a tragic narrative structure. "I would now like to place," he says toward the end of the introduction, "something else on the table: a gun. A gun that appears in Act 1, to fire in Act 3" (65). Modernity is about gaining power over the environment through science and technology. The humanist religion emerged to make this project endurable by worshipping the individual and her meaning-making. "Yet the rise of humanism also contains the seed of its own downfall" (66) in the form of technology that will undermine the individual. Humankind is thus portrayed as a tragic hero whose *hamartia* (tragic flaw) is that it is too successful for its own good. Its actions produce unintended side-effects that may bring about its own end.

Harari's tragic narrative reduces nature to a stage on which the drama is played out. There are clearly external trends that may come to outpace and outdo technological development in the years to come. For example, antibiotic resistance in bacteria, a side effect of our successes in treating infectious diseases, is already here and represents a growing threat to health worldwide (WHO 2014). The threats of famine and war are similarly real, especially in the context of climate change. Climate change threatens food security and peace (Dyer 2010; Brown et al. 2015) and acts, as the US Department of Defense puts it, as a "threat multiplier" (DoD 2014). Harari does discuss climate change briefly, and he touches upon antibiotic resistance, but these ecological factors are only minor characters in his narrative. That is particularly odd given that he places the study of history, society, and the future in a biological context. He emphasizes that unique as we may be in some ways, we are just another

species on planet Earth. He uses central tenets from evolutionary psychology, such as the mismatch hypothesis, in his sketch of human nature. Yet despite this, and despite his hypothesis that humankind may be undermined by its own technological creations, the narrative remains human-centered.

In essence, *Homo Deus* is written with a *ceteris paribus* clause: it outlines some major trends in society and projects what might happen if they are allowed to play out within a more or less unchanging environment. As such, it brings those trends to attention, and it discusses important issues having to do with the impact of technology on society and our views of ourselves. Yet in the real world of ecological interconnectedness, *ceteris paribus* is unlikely to apply—unless, of course, some unforeseen technology comes to save the day.

Despite its shortcomings, *Homo Deus* is a book worth reading. Though many of Harari's simplifications border on the simplistic, they are thought-provoking and, at times, they illuminate complex historical developments. One may not appreciate Harari's sweeping generalizations or his near-neglect of climate change—but he does point to important trends in technology and in the ideas by which we live.

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