

The Rise and Fall of the Human Being

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I read a book this summer entitled *Sapiens*, written by Yuval Noah Harari. The book is a history of the human race, from its simian origins to its endangered present. My sermon, this morning, is going to be somewhat of a book report, and then also some of my reflections upon a couple issues raised in the book.

If you think of the human race from a broad, evolutionary perspective, it really is quite a fascinating story. How did one species of animal, at one point quite unremarkable — how did this one species eventually come to dominate all other species, have such a profound impact upon the survival of other species, and finally develop even to the point where it now has an impact on the very process of natural selection, which brought it into existence in the first place? This is the reality of today, according to Harari: that human beings, *Homo sapiens*, are now usurping nature in terms of directing our evolutionary future. Natural selection is being replaced by bioengineering, bio-technology and artificial intelligence. How we deal with this new reality will determine how we evolve in the future or whether we survive at all, and of course, this new reality will require many ethical decisions. This is what the book, *Sapiens*, presents us for consideration.

How did we get to this point in our history? Harari describes three major revolutions along our journey as a species, and adds to these three a number of other significant factors. First, there was the Cognitive Revolution. Evolutionary mutations in the human brain led to our ability to think in a different way, and to the development of a complex language. Many animals can communicate, and some even have a fairly extensive vocabulary. Some monkeys have one yell for “lion”, whereupon everyone jumps into the trees and looks down; and a different yell for “eagle”, to which everyone responds by looking up. But humans can think and speak in the context of space and time. Only we can say, “Earlier this morning, I saw a lion on the other side of that hill, so you better not go there.” This gives us the evolutionary advantage of being eaten by lions less often, and also a tactical advantage when it comes to hunting, gathering protein, and information sharing in general.

The next major milestone in the history of our species was the Agricultural Revolution. People figured out how to propagate grain in a single location year after year, rather than always having to wander around and find it growing on its own. This event (or events, as it happened independently in more than one place) led to monumental changes for our species. Agriculture made a lot more food available which, from the perspective of biological survival, allowed *sapiens* to greatly expand in population. Suddenly, there were a lot more people, and because we did not have to wander, larger groups of people massed together, which in turn required a different sort of social organization than the previous band or tribe.

Now, let me go back to our cognitive abilities for a moment. One of the themes that Harari keeps bringing up throughout the book, is that we are a delusional species. We keep making things up and then believing that what we have made up is true. Like God, for example. Or religion in general. Or even concepts such as human rights. We make these things up and then believe them.

So, according to Harari, the demographic changes brought on by the Agricultural Revolution forced our species to change one set of delusions for another. Agriculture showed that people had the ability to control nature, so animistic religions, religions which saw the human being as one equal part of a sacred world, gave way to hierarchic religions which placed Man (and I use the gendered word intentionally) above nature, and then God above humanity. God the Creator replaced the gods of creation. Concurrently, a new political delusion became entrenched as well: the belief, sparked by the relative abundance of food, and supported by the new religious delusion, the belief (or delusion) that a social hierarchy was necessary as well, or in other words, a belief that there should be a pyramid of power and wealth, and that some people should have more than others.

By the time the dust settled in the fields of the Agricultural Revolution, most human beings were actually worse off than they had been before. They had to work harder than they did as hunter/gathers; they had a less healthy diet consisting of little else but grain, and they were subject to the oppression of a divinely ordained elite. But there was no going back, because now there were too many people, too many people to be sustained by hunting and gathering. Mass starvation would have been the result of returning to the old ways.

The book is quite readable with many interesting examples, and I am omitting much of it for my purposes today. He touches upon many things that have shaped our human history, such as empire building, the shared delusion of money, capitalism, etc. But I shall conclude this book report part with his third revolution, that is the Scientific Revolution.

The Scientific Revolution began with the admission of ignorance, first by a few people and then by society as a whole. The first scientists admitted that there were things about the world that they did not know, and that it was possible to learn things through observation, experiment, and the application of our intellect — learn things that could improve our lives as individuals, and improve the human condition in general. Before the Scientific Revolution, ignorance did not exist as a catalyst. We knew what we knew and lived accordingly. The whole of truth was codified in holy scriptures and imperial laws, and people were suspicious of new ideas. Some individuals might be ignorant, but the authorities were there to set them straight and teach the truth. There was no such thing as ignorance on the broader scale. The Scientific Revolution changed this, and suddenly there were vast uncharted worlds to explore with the use of the human mind — astronomy, geography, physics, biology, mathematics, and on and on in an ever widening confession of ignorance and the desire to learn.

Which brings us to today, and the impressive accumulation of scientific and technological knowledge and expertise through which we now enhance our own lives, and through which we dominate all other species, and control and destroy our environment. This is where the history of our species ends and the speculation about our future begins. What are we going to do with the dominance that we have attained? Bioengineering, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and advanced scientific knowledge are changing our daily lives, and they will change us as a species. And since these are forces controlled by human beings, rather than by nature, god, or any postulated sense of destiny, we *sapiens* are going to have a lot of questions to answer, and a lot of decisions to answer for.

Yet I suggest that the situation may not be as complicated as it appears, and that the solutions to our crisis of success will lie in ethics and politics. The ethics of people understanding what is in the common good, and the politics around whether we promote the common good or protect the privileged few. In other words, the situation that we are in is dire but not complicated. The quality of our lives, and the future of our species will depend more upon the answers we develop in response to the ethical questions than it will depend upon the advances in our knowledge. What we can do will become less important than what we should do, and why we do it.

Let me start with artificial intelligence. In the news a lot right now is the self-driving car. Everything that is going into the “brain” of the car is being programmed into it by humans, but the advantage of its so-called artificial intelligence, is that, once programmed, it can process more information and can do it faster than we can, and therefore potentially avoid an accident that we would not have avoided.

But perhaps the biggest problem right now is in deciding what and what not to program into the computer of the car, not the physics part which, however complicated, is pretty straightforward, but the ethics part. For example, something has gone wrong and the self-driving car is swerving off the road, heading towards a collision with a pole, the computer reacts and turns the car into the empty space just next to the pole. Successful programming. So now, the simulators place a child in that previously empty space. Should the car be programmed to hit the pole, killing the driver, or to hit the child? Should we use percentages — driver 60% chance of dying, child 90%? Or, should the programming then be changed if the driver of the car is a young mother of three and the person in the space is a 95 year old man? Suddenly the decisions for developing artificial intelligence are based on values rather than technology. As is the broader question, just because we can program in such factors, should we? Is there a degree of chance that we can tolerate? Or would deliberately leaving such decisions out of the equations simply be wrong? The problem is that we can do this, but don't know if we should. These are ethical decisions which in the short term may be answered by the industry, but in the long term, will have to be decided by society.

Similarly, the future of bioengineering and biotechnology will need to be managed with ethical decision-making. We will have to make value judgements as to how gene manipulation can be

used — for eradicating a disease, for simply increasing our strength, for designer children. And we will have to ethically address the issue of who has access to such advances and who does not. Should we replace one person's heart over and over again because we can, and because they have the money to do it? Harari likes to use the word, *amortality*, for people who, with the advantages of bioengineering and biotechnology, will be able to stay alive forever barring some sort of accident. He even suggests that there are some young people alive today who will not have to die. But again, just because we can, should we? It quickly becomes obvious that it is the ethics-based questions that have to be answered, and the values-based decisions that have to be made. Should we keep on living forever? Should all of us or just some of us? Who decides? And then of course the question, why should we keep on living?

Near the beginning of this talk, I mentioned Harari's description of us as delusional creatures — that we are continually making things up and then believing in what we make up. He discusses how such collective beliefs have helped in organizing and controlling large groups of people, but he is rather dismissive of their overall value as they are fantasies rather than reality. And while thus dismissing religion, he uses one sentence to dismiss humanism as well, as simply replacing the delusion of a Supreme God with the delusion of a Supreme Humankind.

Now, I agree with Harari that we do appear to have, as human beings, an inherent quality of making things up that don't actually exist. But I am not quite so dismissive of this quality as being delusional. I would rather give this same phenomenon a different name, such as "meaning-making". I think that it is part of our cognitive make-up to try to find meaning in things, to inject meaning into things. Meaning is not a part of reality — it is something that we make up. For some reason, prehistoric people could not simply look up at the stars and planets and see just stars and planets. They also felt the need to find some meaning there, and thereupon to make up constellations and connections between one celestial body and another, and then go on to create more meaning by making up astrological connections between the stars and human life. There was meaning in painting on the walls of caves. There was meaning in the annual flood, meaning in the ear of corn, meaning in the suffering of a people, meaning in human life, meaning in human death. We make things up and then we believe them to be true.

But humanism, I think, puts a little twist on this. Humanism does not replace a Supreme Being with a Supreme Humanity. Humanism merely suggests that what is of utmost moral importance is how humans act and what humans do — how we treat each other and how we treat our world. Humanism is an ethical religion, it is primarily concerned with what is the right way to live in a community on a planet. We still make things up; we are still trying to create meaning in our lives. We still make things up, and even believe in what we make up, but for the most part, we are aware that we are making it up. We believe that what we make up is true, but that it is not the one true reality, and we recognize that other people are making things up as well.

As an ethical religion, we believe that it matters what we make up. It matters whether I make up and believe in the common good, or whether I make up and believe in a hierarchy of power and wealth. And even though I may be able to make some logical arguments as to why I believe that the common good will be better for the future of humanity, in reality the common good is not something that actually exists. I made it up. Or we made it up — it is where we choose to find or to create meaning. It matters what we make up, because we live by what we make up. It matters whether what we make up is inclusive or exclusive. In reality, for example, there is no such thing as justice, but it matters if we make up and believe in justice, and it matters what we mean by justice.

We can even be wrong about what we make up, learn something, and then make up something we think is better. This is the relativism of ethical religion that so infuriates more dogmatic believers, those who have made up and believe in a one true and eternal reality. But if, for example, we once made up and believed that the common good referred to our responsibility to all humanity, and now want to change that to our responsibility to all life, that is, if we want to broaden our concept of community, we can. It matters what we believe, and we want to get it right. In such a religion of personal responsibility however, it is incumbent upon us to know what we believe, and to be able to explain why we believe one thing and not another. Ethical humanism is no easy path to follow.

However, it may help us as a species when it comes to navigating the complex new realities we are facing as we evolve beyond some of the hitherto black and white, natural boundaries of our existence into this perpetual grey area between what we can do and what we should do. As we are forced to consider new possibilities of life and death, and of human interaction, possibilities that were previously unimaginable, and as we are confronted with having to make value-based, ethical decisions regarding these possibilities, all of our human belief systems will have to adapt. Belief systems which can adapt and embrace new learning may become more important. And those who are able to articulate and discuss new values relevant to these unforeseen circumstances, will likely do a lot to help *sapiens* as a species transition to something better and avoid self-destruction. I believe that we need ethical humanism now more than ever.

But, at this point it is not obvious which way we will go. Society as a whole, sapiens as a species, will eventually have to decide what is wrong and what is right. In ethics and in politics. Right now politically, the social pyramid of power and wealth is still our accepted belief. Right now, it is acceptable that some people should have more than others. And right now, it is acceptable that most of the benefits of our scientific learning should go to those who can afford it. And remember, there may be some young people alive today who will not have to die. Which young people? Right now, ethically as a society it is pretty obvious that we have decided that this will be an option only for the privileged, and perhaps we are content with that. Or, perhaps the next great evolutionary change for *homo sapiens* will need to be, on all fronts, an Ethical Revolution.