

# **SAPIENS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND**

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May 15, 2019

*Sapiens* is a book of history, but its main thrust is philosophical. It explores, or tries to explore, the conundrum that if man is built to seek meaning, but under modernity there is no meaning to be had, what is man to do? Since the author, Yuval Noah Harari, rejects all meaning as myth, yet makes meaning the focus of his book, his book has a split personality. But if you take *Sapiens* simply as longitudinal history, ignoring Harari's sophomoric musings, and if you don't mind the superficial nature of much of his history, you'll have a reasonably good time.

*Sapiens* is only nine years old, but it shows its age from the start of the book. This is because, as David Reich outlines in *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, the genetic archaeology that allows us to understand our distant ancestors has radically expanded in the past decade, and it has totally changed our understanding. Thus, while Harari offers a reasonable explanation of human pre-history as known in 2010, it's out of date. He understates the amount of interbreeding *homo sapiens* did with other human lineages, and overstates the likelihood of the increasingly disproven "replacement" theory, where we simply overwhelmed Neanderthals and others. More importantly, he incorrectly claims that the Cognitive Revolution, in which humans developed language and expanded communication, was a one-time event, whereas it is now evident that it happened simultaneously in widely separated areas, and thus cannot be attributed to a single chance mutation.

However, this initial exposition of historical biology, whatever its factual accuracy, is merely backdrop for Harari's main claim, that the benefit to mankind of the Cognitive Revolution was the ability to create joint fictions that unified mankind. To this Harari attributes nearly all human progress, beginning with coordinating human action beyond that of small clan groups, but progressing far beyond. For Harari, nearly everything is a joint fiction—not just actual myths that bind, and not only all religion, naturally, but also justice, law, nations, corporations, money, and more. Everything that cannot be touched, really, counts as a joint fiction.

The claim that religions, morality, and justice are mere fictions is arguable, though very boring and hardly original. Beyond that, though, Harari's basic claim fails, because most man-made psychic structures and artificial entities are not fictional, but notional. Does Congress not exist because it is a body with power created by agreement, rather than something springing organically from the laws of physics? By Harari's reasoning, under which corporations are fictions and money is a delusion, it does not. But that is obviously false. Similarly, while what constitutes a "nation" can be blurry, it is not fictional. One could not substitute a completely different definition for "France" by fiat; it would lack any tie to reality, unlike the actual nation of France. Similarly, Harari explicitly equates "capitalism" with a religion, claiming that if "the majority of investors and bankers failed to believe" in it our economies would collapse. This is bizarrely silly. The free market, which is what Harari means by "capitalism," is an organic outgrowth of uncoerced exchanges of items with, ultimately, actual value. It is not dependent in any way on some collective myth.

On the other hand, Harari deftly demonstrates that Communism and humanism are no less religions than Christianity and Islam. He also correctly identifies that humanism, a purely Western belief, is merely desiccated Christianity, snarkily noting "The only humanist sect that has actually broken loose from traditional monotheism is evolutionary humanism, whose most famous representatives are the Nazis." This combination, for the reader, of alternating moments of "what the hell?" and consistent logic characterizes the book; one can never tell, in any given section, which you're going to get. At least it keeps the reader on his toes. Perhaps sensing this conflict, Harari tries to dress up his claims with pseudo-scientific language, asserting that what he claims are fictions create an "inter-subjective" reality, a term he apparently made up. He means they are collective fictions, where a single person's belief or unbelief is irrelevant. Maybe, but that still does not make something that is not a fiction a fiction. Harari then compounds this error by repeatedly claiming that the inevitable end result of human creation of fictions is global unity and the ending of nations and nationalism. This thesis is, um, lacking in actual evidence, not that Harari offers any.

In any case, continuing with history, Harari, like James C. Scott, has a lot of sympathy for the view that hunter-gatherers, post-Cognitive

Revolution, had pretty good lives, well-fed and with plenty of time to sit around and do nothing. On the other hand, he notes that those lives may not have been good for everyone involved. Thus, he points out the modern Aché of Paraguay, who blithely kill their own children who annoy them, bury alive “funny looking” babies while people laugh, and ax their old people when they become a burden. Topics like this challenge Harari, because he wants to say this is wrong, but if everything humans believe about right and wrong is a fiction, as he maintains, no morality can exist. Therefore, he tends to make occasional assertions that some actions are wrong, then run away from further thought on the matter, throwing off squid ink to distract the reader. Me, I don’t have this problem. I think it’s good that the Paraguayans put down the Aché, and that the Spanish put down the Aztecs, because they had nasty, evil societies that deserved to be destroyed. Full stop.

Discussion of the Cognitive Revolution is stage setting for a lengthy and lively narration of known, that is, documented, human history up until modern times. First, humanity expanded, using its new ability to share fictions to better organize and overcome opposition, including that of nature. Then humans developed agriculture, in the Agricultural Revolution, allowing more people to exist, although Harari is very skeptical they were happier people. “We will see time and again how a dramatic increase in the collective power and ostensible success of our species went hand in hand with much individual suffering.” By this Harari includes animal suffering, a topic about which he is much exercised, although again, if morality is a fiction, why that should be, other than some instinctive squeamishness, is not clear. (When my wife and I first started dating, she had recently acquired a cat, which she loved almost as much as me. Naturally, she talked to it, and doted on it. Every so often, I would grumpily admonish her, “Stop anthropomorphizing the cat.” This is an error that Harari often falls into, where he anthropomorphizes both animals and the natural world, desperate to show that humans are both different and not different at all.)

In any case, we travel, very rapidly, accompanied by frequent didacticism to remind us of Harari’s frame of fiction, through early pastoralists and farmers; to Hammurabi; through the rest of human history, to the present day. It’s modestly interesting, though there is no new information here. Harari is fond of broad-stroke history, but seems to

lack small-scale knowledge, which does not inspire confidence. No, a thirteenth-century Frenchman could not sell his children into slavery, or be enslaved for debt himself. Slavery had disappeared in Europe long before the thirteenth century (other than in Muslim-controlled areas, notably parts of Spain), and this is not an obscure fact. (Harari's claim is made even stranger by that three hundred pages later he accurately says "At the end of the Middle Ages, slavery was almost unknown in Christian Europe.") No, medieval people were not dissuaded from starting businesses because "they could end up totally destitute" due to lack of limited liability; small-scale medieval businesses did not have liabilities in the same way we do now, with leverage and lawyers, and anyway the same thing is true today, since limited liability does not apply to personally guaranteed debts, which is all small business debt. It is false that "In the US, the technical term for a limited liability company is a 'corporation'"; those are distinct types of legal entities. The Roman emperor killed at Adrianople was Valens, not Valence. As the Spanish gradually and heroically reconquered Spain from Muslim invaders, they sometimes minted coins with Arabic inscriptions not, as Harari implies, because they thought that Muhammad might actually have been Allah's messenger and they were hedging their bets, but because copying accepted coins in newly conquered territory was a standard medieval practice to avoid trade disruptions. Such errors accumulate.

On a more substantial level, Harari ties himself in knots trying to harmonize the unarguable existence of core and biologically dictated differences between men and women, as shown by many undeniable facts, including the universal existence of patriarchy and the complete absence of matriarchies, with the politically correct delusion that differences between men and women are cultural, that is, in Harari's frame, purely fictional. He just can't fathom it. "If, as is being demonstrated today so clearly, the patriarchal system has been based on unfounded myths rather than on biological facts, what accounts for the universality and stability of this system?" Of course, the word "clearly," as usual, indicates something not shown at all, that any "unfounded myths" exist, and with this covering statement, Harari flees the scene, generously releasing more squid ink.

To move history to the present day, Harari outlines the Scientific Revolution. He appropriately credits it purely to Europeans (with a few

halfhearted attempts to falsely claim that, for example, English medical texts adopted American Indian “treatments,” similar to the “history” taught schoolchildren today that Indians invited the hypodermic needle), though he dates it later than most scholars, and tries to avoid giving credit to Christianity, instead giving credit, weirdly, to the discovery of America by Columbus. He also appropriately ascribes the Great Divergence, the lead taken by the West in the Industrial Revolution over the rest of the world and maintained to this day despite the blessings developed by the West being freely available to all, to other cultures’ inability to organize themselves around the right fictions—in other words, to their inferior cultures. And so we arrive at today.

At this point, Harari faces the dilemma of all modern scholars who want to predict the future, as it relates to science. Will it be, in Charles Mann’s words, that of the Prophets, who predict future doom based on resource exhaustion, or of Wizards, who predict future prosperity based on technology? Of course, as Mann points out in his excellent *The Wizard and the Prophet*, only Wizards have ever, so far, proven to be correct. Harari chooses sorcery, white sorcery, as well, for the short term. In his exposition, he is much like Steven Pinker, noting the very many material improvements of the modern world, without the verbal diarrhea that characterizes Pinker.

Harari does touch on problems that result, such as unbridled consumerism and animal suffering, although, once again, since he is all for unlimited personal autonomy and he rejects morality, he glosses over how it is that he can call these problems. This half-a-loaf approach to moral questions is emblematic of much of Harari’s writing about modernity—he criticizes aspects of it, and even shares the insight with conservative writers that autonomic individualism is midwifed by, and benefits, the state and the market, not human beings. But he is unwilling to contemplate any other system—perhaps because Harari himself, although he mentions none of it in this book, is the very essence of an atomized modern man. He is a vegan, atheist, meditation-obsessed homosexual, with (consequently) no children. His kind would find little place in any society that did not worship autonomy or held to any traditional standard of morality. Thus, he cannot bring himself to contemplate that any other kind of society could be acceptable, even though he perceives the problems in the society we have.

All this focuses on the material world, both of plenty and of peace. What, though, of happiness, harder to quantify but arguably a deeper and more important question? Harari, who earlier noted correctly that our ancestors were no less smart than us (and may have been smarter, because they had to be), here observes that our ancestors, despite the pains and dangers they suffered, may have been happier than us. Thus, mere scientific advancement will not lead to more happiness, since what man seeks, and what makes him happy, is not more toys, or even better health, but meaning. Harari ascribes that men in past ages were content because their “collective delusions” gave them meaning, by which he primarily means religion, although he may also mean, and should mean, other forms of seeking after meaning, such as the search for glory.

What should we do, then? Well, first Harari issues a brief plug for Buddhism (the real thing, not the pallid version pushed by most Westerners). He instructs us that what people need, most of all, is to know the truth about themselves; from that they can derive meaning. Why that should be is unclear, and it fits poorly with the author’s earlier assertion that meaning is derived from collective delusion. No matter, though, since Harari has a solution. He predicts, and advocates, black sorcery—the destruction of *homo sapiens* through our replacement by a predicted, and wholly imaginary, future of some new type of engineered man.

Here the book falls apart. In fifteen pages, Harari speeds through a superficial but glossy set of fantasies, throwing out terms that sound sexy and telling us that, most likely, the Singularity is coming and we will remake humanity from whole cloth. This is all stupid. As with artificial intelligence, something that is going exactly nowhere, recreating ourselves through rebuilding our genome is not going to happen. Harari issues numerous sweeping yet contentless statements, punctuated with a picture of what is supposed to be a miracle advance, a misshapen partial human external ear grown on a mouse’s back. From 1996. I am not impressed. When YouTube can auto-generate subtitles that are 100% accurate, instead of the gibberish Linear A it does now, and someone transplants a human eye, then I’ll believe that any of this is coming.

Oh, I suppose it’s theoretically possible to do, just like almost anything can be imagined, but there is very little evidence of any progress

in this direction. One only has to review all the never-arriving cures that we were promised were imminent through new applications of biology, from angiogenesis in cancer to stem cells, to realize that we are very, very far away from *homo deus* (the title of the book Harari wrote next). And since the pace of scientific innovation has, in fact, slowed down greatly (exemplified by Peter Thiel's complaint that he was promised flying cars and got 140 characters), and the West, which has produced all relevant scientific progress to date, is killing its dynamism, competency, and capability by a combination of having no children and worshipping the destructive Left gods today named diversity and inclusion, there is no chance whatsoever that any of what Harari predicts will happen will actually happen (not that we should do it if we could). At the rate we're going, unless we remake society rather than remaking ourselves, we'll have less relevant science in fifty years, not more.

He never quite comes out and says it, but what Harari seems to be trying to say is that new humans will subsist on new forms of meaning, thus solving the problem that modernity has erased man's ability to find meaning. This is a dumb pipe dream. If people are unhappy in modernity, the correct response is to fix modernity, and cohere our dreams to our nature. We should keep the science that sprang from the West and Christianity, which has nothing to do with autonomy, democracy, or any other Enlightenment or pseudo-Enlightenment garbage principle, and throw the rest of the modern world overboard. As I like to say, why not the High Middle Ages with rockets? That's the project we should be starting, not trying desperately to insert meaning into our lives by reworking our DNA.