

To be or not to be Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus*

Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Vintage, London 2017, pp. 512.

How one can write another review of the book that comes already with glowing praises from *The Observer* (“An exhilarating book...”), *The Guardian* (“Spellbinding...”), or *The Evening Standard* (“A brilliant original...”); the book written by an author that lectures at The University of Oxford, has sold over million copies and has been dubbed as “international phenomena”? It seems like a daunting task. But let me try.

The book *Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow* aims high. It “asks fundamental questions about us and our future”, “it explores the projects, dreams and nightmares that will shape the twenty-first century and beyond- from overcoming death to creating artificial life”, and “shows us where mankind is headed in an absolutely clear-sighed and accessible manner”. Wow. You may say. Finally there is someone who penetrated it all, who has answers

to our deepest existential worries and cures for our ills. The author spells out his goals clearly “(To understand) the real future... we need to go back and investigate who *Homo sapiens* really is, how humanism became the dominant world religion and why attempting to fulfill the humanist dream is likely to cause its disintegration. This is the basic plan of the book” (p.76).

The book of more than 500 pages is divided into three sections. Section one describes the nature of *Homo sapiens* and attempts to explain its success in dominating the world and other species of animals. Here we learn how during the history of humanity we (*Homo sapiens*) came to the civilization we are in today. How did we conquer calamities that haunted humanity since dawn of man like hunger, wars, and diseases – as, according to the author these are no longer our worries? How did we develop modern civilization where most of our past problems have been cured and solved and how did we eliminated (or nearly so) other species? Section two discusses myths and ideas that have ruled the mankind and shaped civilizations. Harari presents here his views on religions, politics, and history. He also presents his new vision of human-

ism as a modern covenant that would substitute for old folktales (like religion, or democracy). The Third section of the book is certainly the most imaginative. It is about the future so it is like a sci-fi piece. And it is. Writing anything about the future is an easy job if one has a vivid fantasy. Future is open (so some may think) and the most importantly by the time it comes, the author will be long gone; thus, he is safe from the critics and reality. Thus, it is safe to write whatever. Like other gurus of tomorrow *vide* Ray Kurtzweil or Isaac Asimov.

The book fusses facts and tidbits of information from biology, genetics, computing, biochemistry, anthropology, history into one story. And the story is well told and moves along fast. Harari spices the narrative with curiosities such as that the precursor to the Turing Test was the test applied to gay men in 1950s Britain (p. 140), or of course the stories of “the Clever Hans”, “Deep Blue” and Google’s AlphaGo. You cannot have a book on humanity’s past, present and future’s future without these ‘facts’.

To offer you a flavor of the book I quote some of the more intriguing passages. The author quotes Jeremy Bentham and John Steward Mills as gurus of happen-

ings “happiness is nothing but pleasure and freedom from pain, and beyond pleasure there is no good and no evil” (p. 41). The Bentham example as our guide to happiness is a bit disturbing if someone recalls that he was an author of the notorious Panopticon devised for the selected part of a population as a solution to social problems of the early capitalism. Hariri’s deep thought about happiness: “according to the life sciences” is that “happiness and suffering are nothing but different balances of bodily sensations” (p. 42). But it seems that Hariri is missing something from Mill “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question”.

Another interesting insight offered by Hariri is about events from the history of 20th century, for some of us still vivid in our memories: “Twenty-century Russian history was largely shaped by the communist attempt to overcome inequality, but it did not succeed”. One may ask whether the Russian communism was really “an attempt to overcome inequality”? We would expect some better insights from

a book that is supposed to explain to us “all these things”.

One also may wonder at Hariri’s striking analogies like this one “Just like Elvis Presley, pharaoh too was a brand rather than a living organism” (p. 186). Yes, there are some analogies but there are differences that make these analogies quite meaningless, at least for me. Some may say it is so deep an insight to compare pharaoh with Elvis; I say, not at all.

The author has obviously decided to single out some religious dogmas and books as myths and phantasms. Thus, we have animism, Ancient Greek Gods, Christianity, Hinduism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Bible, Vedas, Qur’an, referred to over and over again as fake truths. But it seems that some other important religions with their foundational books are missing from the list. You may wonder. Harari offers us a critique of a recent refugee crisis in Germany and Europe: “Does preserving polka, bratwurst and the German language justify leaving millions of refugees exposed to poverty and possibly even death?” (p. 293). But is “preserving polka and bratwurst” really the issue here? Again, one would expect a bit deeper insight than these platitudes from the lecturer at The Uni-

versity of Oxford. There are some a bit more disturbing “parables of sorts” that Harari offers us. You may check one on pages 212-213.

Harari’s book does give many insights like: “Since we do not know what the job market will look like in 2030 or 2040...we have no idea what to teach our kids” (p. 380). Or “The Romanian Communist Party successfully dominated the disorganized Romanian population” (p. 162). Or “*Homo sapiens* became the single most important agent of change in the global ecology”. Or “the single greatest constant of history is that everything changes” (p. 78). These are rather obvious, for an intelligent person at least. Thus, the question is what is new here? The list of these well-known truths that are supposed to be revelations is quite long.

So what is the overall impression that the book leaves you with? The book as I would presume is designed to shock you with these simple but profound truths about ourselves. It certainly does this. A plethora of (selective) facts, analogies, curiosities, quotations from famous authorities (again selective), quick summaries some of them well known, some less known, some unexpected and some unjust-

tified. The book is rather a curiosity shop than a well-balanced, well augmented exposure of who we are and what we will be doing in the future. Should you read it? Well, there is no book that would explain “all of this” in one volume, so do not expect this one to do it. But reading the book is certainly entertaining and may open your eyes to some problems that we as humanity are facing. Most people on Amazon.com gave it five or four stars (1117 reviews, 66% 5 stars, 16% four stars, 8% three stars, and 2 and 1 star each 5 %) so evidently they did enjoy reading it.

I wanted to leave you with some parting thoughts about humanity from Hariri’s work: “In

essence, we humans are not that different from rats, dogs, dolphins or chimpanzees. Like them, we too have no soul. Like us, they too have consciousness and a complex world of sensations and emotions” (p. 149). “The algorithms controlling vending machines work through mechanical gears and electric circuits. The algorithms controlling humans work through sensations, emotions and thoughts. And exactly the same kind of algorithms control pigs, baboons, otters, and chickens” (p. 99). These are some insights into our nature that will shape our future in incoming decades, according to Yuval Harari.

ROMAN KRZANOWSKI